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Redefining independence: voices of single mothers on welfare about motherhood, marriage, and welfare policy

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**Redefining independence: Voices of single mothers on welfare about motherhood,
marriage, and welfare policy**

by

Wan-Juo Cheng

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Human Development and Family Studies (Marriage and Family Therapy)

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2007

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ABSTRACT

The dependency discourse has become a prominent concern in discussions of welfare policies in the United States. To address the cultural fear of dependence on welfare, the 1996 welfare reform greatly emphasized work and marriage promotion. Poor single mothers on welfare were mandated to move into the workforce under a cultural belief held by the Administration that work leads to independence. Feminists suggest that independence upheld by welfare reform is discussed from a middle-class, patriarchal perspective with an emphasis on financial self-sufficiency, which largely overlooks issues of gender and social class intertwined with poverty. Additionally, marriage promotion is deemed by feminists to discourage poor single mothers on welfare from pursuing independence. Moreover, voices of single mothers have been marginalized from discussions of in/dependence in the context of welfare. This qualitative study, informed by feminist standpoint theory, aimed to give voice to single mothers on welfare with a focus on redefining independence generating from their experiences and struggles with motherhood, marriage/relationship, and welfare policy through multiple in-depth interviews. The research participants indicated that commitment to and responsibility for the children's best interests enabled them to stay strong in tough circumstances, and make choices within an environment where resources were limited. Welfare was seen by the participants as one resource to help them on the path toward independence. They articulated two dimensions of independence—financial and psychological—and viewed financial independence as a path to achieve psychological independence. Marriage was not considered by the mothers until they achieved both financial and psychological independence. Marriage promotion was strongly criticized by the participants because it left poor single mothers in a dependency state from welfare to men.

Access to education was suggested to taken the place of marriage promotion by the research participants. Findings challenge the dominant discourse of dependency and have implications for professionals who work with mothers who receive welfare.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the issue of dependency has become a significant concern in discussions of welfare policies in the United States. Poor single mothers on welfare are often portrayed as “lazy,” “manipulative,” and “abusing the welfare system” (Bullock, Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Jackson, 1997; McLaughlin, 1997). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, known as welfare reform that was signed by President Clinton, strongly emphasized work requirements and marriage promotion to end “chronic dependency.” To meet the work requirement, which is supported by a cultural belief that work leads to independence, poor single mothers have to work outside the household or participate in work-related activities for an average of 30 hours per week in exchange for welfare benefits (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). In addition to work requirements, the federal government uses grants to promote marriage and advocate two-parent families with the assumption that children receive better care in two-parent families than in single families. The federal government claims success of welfare reform by providing evidence that millions of welfare recipients have been placed in the workforce, which reduces the TANF rolls by 60 percent, from 4.4 million families in August 1996 to 1.9 million families in September 2005 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). However, whether the reduction of TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) rolls indicates success in welfare reform is in question. Many welfare scholars and feminists (Albelda, 2001; Bloom & Kilgore, 2003; Hennessy, 2005; Hofferth, 2002; Lichter, & Jayakody, 2002; Medley, Edelhoch, Lin, & Martin, 2005; Mink, 1998b) critique measures of success in welfare programs, and argue that the work-first approach

policy informed by a patriarchal ideology that employment is the means toward independence devalues poor single mothers' caring work for their children.

Statement of the Problem

Perspectives of poor single mothers on welfare have been left out in debates of in/dependency and discussions of welfare policy. The story about welfare success is incomplete because experiences and voices of the subjects that welfare programs aim to serve are excluded. Additionally, the federal government's claim of success of welfare reform needs to be questioned—Success in what? Reduction of the welfare rolls by moving welfare recipients to workforce, or welfare recipients' achievement of independence? Blalock, Tiller, and Monroe (2004) reported in their study that most poor mothers with low-paying jobs that did not provide benefits were on and off welfare until reaching the time limit, and still lived in deep poverty after leaving welfare. By poor mothers' accounts, this is evidence that the “success” of welfare is indeed questionable. Most importantly, the dominant discourse of independence upholding welfare policy that excludes poor single mothers' visions of independence may result in inadequately addressing needs of the mothers and their children.

Feminists (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Kittay, 1998, 1999; Mink, 1998) have discussed genealogies of the in/dependence discourse in the context of welfare, and have strongly critiqued the independence that welfare reform upholds as a male dominant ideology that inadequately addresses “dependency” of poor single mothers reliant on welfare. They argue that welfare reform over-emphasizes employment and devalues childcare work that poor single mothers view as a primary responsibility. Many research studies (Blalock et al., 2004; Jencks & Swingle, 2000; Lee & Abrams, 2001; Rogers-Dillon & Haney, 2005; Roy, Tubbs,

& Burton, 2004; Tweedie & Reichert, 1998) were conducted to discuss challenges and issues related to work that poor single mothers on welfare encounter, and found that poor single mothers juggle work and mothering, and are struggling to make ends meet.

Marriage promotion greatly concerns feminists and welfare researchers. For instance, Mink (1998) suggested that marriage promotion discourages poor single mothers from pursuing independence. Thomas (1997) argues that one prevailing myth indicates single motherhood causes poverty. Accordingly, it is not surprising that legislators view marriage promotion as a “cure” for poverty. Coltrane (2001) further points out that the TANF program upholds the patriarchal ideology of marriage, and marginalizes and penalizes the growing number of families that do not fit into the “ideal” picture of two-parent family. Research studies (Edin, 2000; Lichter, Bateson & Brown, 2004; Mauldon, London, Fein, Patterson, & Sommer, 2004; Waller, 2001) were conducted to explore ideas of single mothers on welfare had about marriage. However, although much work has been done regarding the impact of work requirements on mothering practices, issues related to employment, and/or marriage in the context of welfare, more studies need to be conducted to explore single mothers’ perspectives of independence and experiences with motherhood, relationship/marriage, and welfare policy.

The Purpose of the Study

The notion of independence reflected in the welfare reform of 1996 is informed by an individualist and patriarchal ideology that strongly focuses on financial self-sufficiency. However, there is a dearth of research studies investigating ideas of independence from perspectives of single mothers on welfare. This qualitative study aimed to expand knowledge of independence in the context of welfare by moving poor single mothers to the center from

the margin to discuss their perspectives of independence. I assume that poor single mothers possess multiple social identities, such as mother, provider, relationship partner, welfare recipient, and wage worker, and that perspectives engendered from each role influence their ideas of independence. This assumption leads to another assumption that independence the mothers construct goes beyond employment leading to independence. With these assumptions, I was interested in exploring poor single mothers' ideas of motherhood and independent mothering practices. Moreover, the mothers' perspectives of marriage/relationship and critiques of marriage promotion were explored. Additionally, I studied the mothers' ideas of welfare policy and of potential improvements in the policy with the hope to make welfare policy more effective for poor single mothers. Alternative discourses of independence were constructed through explorations and discussions of motherhood, relationship, and welfare policy. Thus, this study centered on perspectives of poor single mothers on welfare of independence generated from their daily experiences and struggles with motherhood, relationship/marriage, and welfare policy.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of welfare by poor families, especially single mothers, has been in political and social debates for over thirty years. One welfare issue concerning politicians and policymakers was whether welfare programs reinforce recipients' dependency on public assistance (Haskins, 2001). The evolution and meanings of the dependency discourse associated with welfare can be understood through historical reviews of welfare policies. In a review of published documents in debates on welfare in past decades, Brush (1997) found one issue associated with welfare was to distinguish worthy from unworthy mothers. Characteristics of the worthy were evaluated by caseworkers, social workers, psychologists for paying the deserved using various standards, including moral, psychological/mental, personality traits, and sexuality respectability. Mink (1998b), in a review of the history of welfare legislation, points out that certain welfare recipients, especially unmarried black women, were required to work outside the home in exchange for welfare benefits during the 1950s and 1960s. This seems to imply that legislators believed work was the best solution to end the "chronic dependency" (Mink, 1998b, p. 37) of unmarried mothers on welfare. As Mink (1998b) points out, the work requirements as a tactic for determining who deserved assistance prevented both Federal and State governments from "paying the wrong women to stay home with children born under the wrong conditions" (p. 37). Accordingly, concerns with welfare use have placed focus on individual mothers' marital status and character flaws rather than on problems related to social structures. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, known as welfare reform, more explicitly reflected the public's concern that women reliant on welfare benefits were lacking in motivation for

job employment and marriage. McLaughlin and Lichter (1997) argue that poor single mothers were reluctant to marry the men who fathered their children because of the availability of welfare benefits. Thus, the PRWORA required States to closely supervise welfare recipients regarding time limits on cash benefits and their compliance with the work requirements, and promoted marriage and two-parent families as goals. In the welfare reform of 2003, the Bush Administration intensified this act by budgeting block grants to promote healthy two-parent married families as one of the main goals in the TANF program.

The historical framework provides a scope to understand how discourses of poverty and welfare dependency shape poor single mothers' lives and relationships. Discourses go beyond messages consisting of words; in effect, they present social norms with the power to regulate individuals' lives (Hirschmann, 1997). Consistent with a discourse of dependence with welfare recipients, it makes sense that the government should take actions—the work requirements and marriage promotion—to “fix” the issues of poverty and dependency on welfare. However, an omission of discussions of structural power over single mothers on welfare may result in endangering mothers' rights. As Gergen (1999) argues, social injustice is often a product of structural power in use without awareness. In the case of welfare used by poor single mothers, they surrender to the welfare requirements—the structural power—in order to receive benefits. In relations of power, as Foucault (1977) suggests, the work requirement and marriage promotion serve a purpose to help the poor single mother on welfare to build “independence” as defined by the government. What must be understood is the “love of the master” (Foucault, 1977, p. 139), which refers to the government that directs the poor mothers on public assistance to be independent in case of welfare. In this relation of power, the mothers' voices or opinions do not count. What is the best for them is already

determined by the “master.” The mothers’ rejection of this “love” from the master may be viewed as a challenge to the master’s power, which leads to severe consequences, such as loss of benefits. On the other hand, surrender to the master’s “love” leads the mothers to another form of subordination to a patriarchal discourse. For instance, Bloom and Kilgore (2003) argued that welfare policy colonized welfare mothers by instilling the idea of “work first” into their mind with the intention of turning poor mothers depending on welfare to productive wage workers; in effect, it further created the mothers’ resistance to hegemonic ideology that employment is the only mean to demonstrate personal responsibility for themselves as well as their children.

In this chapter, I discuss the welfare reform acts of 1996 and 2003, centering on work requirements and marriage promotion. A cultural discourse of dependency embedded in welfare reform will be discussed. Motherhood practices related to the dominant discourse of dependency will be explored. Last, social and political debates about marriage as a strategy employed to assist poor single mothers to move toward independence will be presented.

Welfare Reform

The Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) under the Social Security Act of 1935 aimed to help single mothers with dependent children in response to the Great Depression. Lemann (1991) points out that President Johnson proposed that work would help the poor to be independent. Accordingly, job training, education, legal aid, and community action became foci in Johnson’s proposed War on Poverty with the theme “a hand up, not hand-out” (Rodgers, 2006, p. 83). As a matter of fact, AFDC grew to unexpected levels, and the public officials realized that it seemed cheaper to leave most welfare recipients at home and on the dole until the cost of Medicaid became expensive in the mid-1980 and the 1990s

(Rodger, 2006). President Reagan believed that the welfare system was expensive and indulgent, and proposed compulsory work requirements for the able-bodied poor. In 1988, Congress passed the Family Support Act (FSA) that aimed to help the welfare and ex-welfare recipients to become self-sufficient through employment by providing Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training programs and other support services (e.g., childcare) to welfare recipients engaging in education, employment, or job training. After Clinton was elected, he invited experts to design a new reform plan based on FSA that would “end welfare as we know it.”

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act

Although work had been advocated within different Acts in past decades, it did not succeed to help families on welfare have better lives. As the welfare rolls grew unexpectedly, legislators were concerned that AFDC encouraged single mothers to stay home with their children and further reinforced single motherhood (Johnson & Gais, 2001). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was signed into law by President Clinton in 1996. In order to end welfare dependency, the PRWORA aimed to achieve the goals of stimulating work, promoting healthy marriages, and reducing non-marital births among single mothers on welfare (Haskins, 2001). Welfare recipients must work at a paid job or participate in work-related activities, such as community service or job training, in exchange for benefits (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1996). Furthermore, in order to prevent poor single mothers from seeing “welfare as a way of life” (Mink, 1998b, p. 33), a five-year lifetime limit for receiving assistance was set. This act reflects the concept that welfare is a temporary charity. One billion dollars was awarded to the states under these

guidelines, which succeeded in moving welfare recipients off of the welfare rolls (Coffield, 2002).

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program under the 1996 PRWORA, known as Welfare to Work, is a block grant program to promote self-sufficiency through work. In addition to the work requirements, marriage promotion and two-parent families are goals that the federal government has strongly advocated. Marriage promotion was supported by a belief that “marriage is the foundation of a successful society” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Behind the marriage promotion were concerns about children growing up in a single-parent household, including the belief that children are likely to have problems in school and poor academic achievement, to be involved in drug, alcohol or other illegal activities in neighborhoods with high crime rates and then become involved in the juvenile justice system, and to end up poor, not married and receiving welfare (Johnson & Gais, 2001). These statements imply that single-parent families undermine the foundation of a successful society. Accordingly, it is thought that the key to improving children’s well-being is to change family structure by promoting marriage and reducing out-of-wedlock births (Johnson & Gais, 2001).

To continue the 1996 PRWORA, President Bush (2002) advocated “Working toward independence.” According to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002), the TANF program under the new act aims to complete four goals, including:

“1) Provide assistance to needy families so that children can be cared in their own home or the homes of their relatives; 2) End dependence of families on public assistance by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; 3) Prevent and reduce out-of-wedlock births; and 4) Encourage and maintain two-parent families as a family formation.”

Because of a concern that more than half of welfare recipients on TANF did not fully engage in work, the Bush Administration believed that they violated the spirit of welfare reform—that all welfare recipients must be fully engaged in work or constructive activities that lead them to self-sufficiency and independence. States are required to take responsibility to engage welfare families in work or work-related activities, and to closely monitor progress that families make.

President Bush strongly advocates the formation and maintenance of married, two-parent families. In his proclamation released on the White House website, he explicitly expressed his belief in the influence of family structure on children's well-being, and proposed that healthy marriage was a means to enhance it (Bush, 2003):

To encourage marriage and promote the well-being of children, I have proposed a healthy marriage initiative to help couples develop the skills and knowledge to form and sustain healthy marriages. Research has shown that, on average, children raised in households headed by married parents fare better than children who grow up in other family structures. Through education and counseling programs, faith-based, community, and government organizations promote healthy marriages and a better quality of life for children.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2003) indicated that married two-parent families had the lowest poverty rate at 4.9 percent; whereas female-headed families without a spouse had the highest rate at 26.5 percent. Although marriage promotion is not taken as a means to solve the poverty issue, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002) stated that stable marriage is associated with stable employment and high wages. Accordingly, the healthy marriage program is seen as a strategy to help TANF families establish economical self-sufficiency.

Application of the PRWORA in Texas—TANF Works

Consistent with the federal PRWORA, the TANF Works (Texas Health and Human Services Commission, 2004) in Texas, where the study was conducted, strongly emphasizes independence through work. It requires welfare recipients to cooperate with the Personal Responsibility Agreement (PRA) under the TANF Works authorized by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (2004), in which the recipients must engaged in full-time or part-time work activities or job training at local workforce, cooperate with child support requirements, agree not to voluntarily quit a job, and stay free of alcohol or drug abuse. Recipients who are single parents caring for a child under age one or providing care for an ill or disabled household member can be exempted from the employment requirements. The notion of “Work First” is put into an action through Choices, the service that assists welfare applicants and recipients to prepare for, obtain, and retain employment. In addition to services of employment search and maintaining, Choices provides Education Services to help recipients to receive a high school diploma or a certificate of general equivalence.

Under Family Violent Options (FVO) of the federal legislation, in the State of Texas, TANF applicants or recipients experiencing domestic violence may waive the cooperation of child support, if a “good cause” exists. According to the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC, 2005), assessments of good cause are granted to professional staff at the facilities contracted with HHSC. The “good cause” can also be applied to an exemption of work requirements. Yet the “good cause” for exemptions of employment is reevaluated every month, can be extended if the circumstances are not resolved after resources are provided to remedy the situation, and may be granted for up to 12 months per occurrence. According to the Annual Report on State TANF in 2005, 178 recipients were granted “good

cause” due to domestic violence.

The State government budgets grants for healthy marriage promotion and responsible fatherhood. Marriage promotion is implemented through

1) premarital counseling for engaged couples and marriage counseling for married couples that included skill development for anger resolution, family violence prevention, communication, honoring your partner, and managing a budget; 2) Physical fitness and active lifestyle and nutrition and cooking, including: abstinence for all unmarried persons, including abstinence for persons who have previously been married; and (3) parenting skills, including parenting skills for character development, academic success and step children. (H.B. 2292, Texas, 2003).

Individuals participating in the program may be awarded an additional cash benefit of 60 dollars per month.

One underlying concern with federal and state legislation of welfare is dependency. Work requirements and marriage promotion were used by the some people in the Administration as strategies to “enhance” the mothers’ ability to move toward independence. Yet what needs to be questioned is whether removal from the welfare rolls means an achievement of independence, and how the discourse of independence shapes the lives of poor single mothers on welfare. These issues will be further explored in the next section.

Discourse of In/dependence

A cultural fear of dependence on public assistance drives welfare reformers to advocate employment as a path to independence. Fraser and Gordon (1994) point out that “dependency” as an ideological term refers to the condition of poor single mothers who rely on state support because of an absence of a male breadwinner in their families and/or a difficulty in earning an adequate wage to meet their needs. This dependency discourse influences not only welfare reformers but also social scientists studying welfare. Since 1996,

there have been countless research studies conducted to investigate effectiveness of employment and marriage promotion on independence of single mothers on welfare.

However, in most cases, independence was not clearly defined.

One cannot address the dominant discourse of dependency without discussing the discourse of independence. Independence can be defined as a capacity to care and be responsible for self without depending on others, which is consistent with the cultural virtue of individualism in the United States (Porter, 2001). In effect, to achieve such independence requires economic self-sufficiency. Society also privileges independence as central to citizenship, meaning that a citizen is expected to make contributions to society. Accordingly, dependence of poor single mothers on state support erodes their full citizenship (Porter, 2001; Smiley, 2001). They are often viewed as second-class citizens. In addition to erosions of their citizenship, Mink (1998) points out that poor single mothers' rights have been affected in several ways by the constitution of welfare policies. For instance, the federal government rewards the states that successfully reduce out-of-wedlock births. In order to achieve this goal, the states encourage welfare recipients to implant Norplant, or deny the benefits for children born to mothers on welfare. Moreover, mothers on welfare are often compelled to choose the role of a worker over that of mother in order to keep benefits (Little, 1999).

Feminist movements since the 1970s have strongly advocated women's rights for equal wages and job opportunities outside the household. Thereafter, "working women" or even "working mothers" have been perceived as normative, a part of the cultural discourse that expects women to hold paid jobs (Secombe, 1999). Paid work is viewed as a way to achieve independence. In debates on welfare reform, many feminists took a similar approach as conservatives in prescribing that work is a path toward independence (Mink, 1998).

Through participation in the labor field, single mothers on welfare presumably obtain a state of full citizenship. The TANF program that aims to achieve “work toward independence” is a reflection of these discourses. The dominant discourse of independence has been criticized as androcentric and patriarchal by some feminists (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Kittay; 1999).

Fraser and Gordon (1994) locate the origin of the notion of independence in the industrial era in which white male workers changed their views of their labor for employers from wage slavery to wage labor. This construction enabled the workers to shift dependence on masters to themselves and their job skills. Furthermore, male workers as providers demanded a family wage to support their dependent wives and children. The “family man” image was derived from this notion, meaning that the responsible man should raise his family without relying on external support (Porter, 2001). Accordingly, waged work symbolized independence. Women were expected to be dependent, and in effect rely on their husbands for economic support. However, in social and political debates on “dependency” on welfare, the expected dependence state becomes pathological dependency for single mothers on welfare, which further undermines their citizenship, and at worst makes them invisible (Young, 1995). In other words, in/dependence of poor mothers without a spouse to support them seems to be judged by a male dominant discourse of independence.

There have been many social and political debates on the issue of welfare dependency between Republicans and Democrats; one frequently occurring concern is of welfare recipients’ “unemployment.” Republicans believed that welfare encourages dependency. Democrats questioned the economic structure, and argued that there were not enough adequate jobs for welfare recipients. Both positions support the dominant discourse that waged work counts as legitimate work that poor single mothers on welfare should strive for.

Some feminists, who have dedicated themselves to rights of poor mothers on welfare, have argued that the strong emphasis on waged work leading toward independence undermines values of caregiving work of single mothers on welfare (Kittay, 1999; Mink, 1998). However, this might not be the case for middle-class mothers. According to the dominant discourse, while mothers on welfare are required to work outside the household, middle-class mothers with financial support from their husbands have the flexibility to choose to stay home to care for their children (Roberts, 1999). It is suggested by the prevailing discourse that full-time care by mothers is the best arrangement for children. It is also believed that helping children to become good citizens requires a great deal of attention and love from parents, especially mothers, because mothers are often expected to take more responsibility to attend to their children's needs and interests (Young, 1995). However, poor single mothers living on welfare have to act on dual roles as a mother as well as a provider. In the female-headed household without a male breadwinner, a responsible mother not only does parenting work but also has to be a solo provider to raise her family. Working outside the household often compels poor single mothers on welfare to leave their children in strangers' care if they do not have private support from family, kin, or friends. This leaves them with a dilemma. If a mother on welfare had to work outside the household to meet the work requirements, some might be concerned that the quality of childcare would be affected. They would not be able to supervise their children as they used to do or to be involved in the children's school as expected. If their children had trouble in school or with the justice system, as expected by some people in the Administration who hold the belief that children growing up in single parent households are less likely to receive better care than children growing up in two parent households; these mothers may be blamed for not being responsible for their children. On the other hand, if

they choose to stay home full-time to care their children, mothers on welfare run the risk of losing welfare benefits.

Mink (1998) argues that full-time caregiving work provided by mothers is a class privilege. Full-time caregiving work provided by middle-class mothers who choose to stay home have been acknowledged and granted Individual Retirement Accounts (IRAs). Unfortunately, full-time childcare is not a privilege for poor single mothers on welfare. They are expected to be more of a provider than a mother for their children, and judged by the standards of a good provider as well as standards of a good mother. Mink (1998) points out that poor single mothers fall into a category of irresponsible and lousy mothers as they are striving to meet the welfare requirements.

Some feminists (Kittay, 1998, 1999; Little, 1999; Mink, 1998; Smiley, 2001) have offered alternative perspectives of in/dependence for single mothers on welfare. Kittay (1998) argues that one fundamental feature of human life is vulnerability. Although independence is deemed to be a great virtue of citizenship, individuals inevitably encounter circumstances in which they may depend on others' care through their life cycle. When one's well-being is reliant on others, both dependence and independence have to be acknowledged in human life. Moreover, both dependency relations to caregivers, who are usually mothers, and dependency work provided by the caregivers should be valued. Accordingly, Kittay (1999) strongly argued that welfare "dependency" should target the dependent children of single mothers on welfare, rather than the mothers. She argues that single mothers in this case are dependency workers independently providing care for the dependents, their children. In addition, the caregiving work for the children requires their commitment and time that should be valued by society. Welfare reform, which adopted the dominant discourse of independence,

failed to recognize the value of unpaid dependency work provided by single mothers on welfare as well as their commitment to mothering (Kittay, 1999). Little (1999) reported that an identity of “a good mother” enabled the mothers in her study to resist the dependency discourse, and that the mothers viewed themselves as independent in the sense that they were heads of the household. Contrary to the traditional family norm in which men are often seen as providers and decision-makers for families, independence in female-headed households without male providers should be defined differently. Accordingly, feminists (Kittay, 1998, 1999; Michel, 1998; Mink, 1998; Porter, 2001) strongly argue that childcare, as dependency work provided by single mothers on welfare, should be recognized as legitimate work supported by welfare checks.

Welfare does not just matter to poor single mothers. In effect, it reflects the discourse that caregiving work provided by women is not valued in contemporary society. Welfare is a women’s issue, as many contemporary feminists argue, mainly because it reflects social responsibilities assigned to all women of caregiving work for dependents (e.g., children, disabled, elderly); however, their assigned work is treated unfairly. Thus, “work to independence” should be reframed to reflect how welfare policies could provide better social and economic support to single mothers caring for their children.

Motherhood Experiences in the Context of Poverty

According to Thurer (1994), one prevailing discourse portrays motherhood as involving a full-time stay-home mother who is primarily responsible for taking care of her family’s needs. In this picture, the father presumably works outside the home to meet their financial needs. Along with changes in current society, another portrayal of motherhood has emerged. In this picture, a mother juggles between demands of full-time employment outside

the household and the children's needs; whereas the father is still only responsible for providing economically for the family. One similarity between the two images is that mothers are primarily responsible for attending to children's needs. This normative construct of motherhood is based on an assumption that nothing else could take the place of a "natural" bond between a mother and the child (Blum & Deussen, 1996).

Portrayals of Single Motherhood in the Context of Poverty

The portrayal of motherhood in the context of poverty is that women juggle between roles of mother and of provider. Being a "good mother" in this context not only means to provide good care for her children but also independently provide for the family's financial needs (Berrick, 1995; Edin & Levin, 1996; Seccombe, 1999). Most single mothers who rely on welfare came from destructive relationships or marriages, and experience multiple losses and financial stress (Schein, 1995). In a society full with gendered biases and inequality, these poor single mothers, who usually did not have competitive educations and work skills, hardly make a livable wage. Welfare often becomes an alternative option for them to live independently, especially for the mothers who leave abusive relationships with few resources. Despite the work requirements, poor single mothers desire to have a well-paying job in order to make a better life for their children. However, employment that they can find is usually in the low-waged services sector without benefits (Blalock et al., 2004; Jencks & Swingle, 2000; Tweedie & Reichert, 1998). Jobs in the low-waged service sectors often require work at irregular hours, mostly at night and on weekends. Most likely, the jobs do not allow poor single mothers to take time off for their sick children. As Roy, Tubbs, and Burton (2004) described in their research on organization of time for low-income families on welfare, work schedules of the mothers greatly affect their management of time they can spend with their

children as well as on daily routines. Harris (1996) points out that work often become a problem for poor single mothers rather than a solution.

Education, referring to a college degree, was identified a path toward stable jobs with a livable wage and benefits in research and theoretical papers (Butler, Deprez, & Smith, 2004; Christopher, 2005; Coffield, 2002; Deprez & Butler, 2001; Dill, 1998; Jennings, 2002; Jones-DeWeever, 2002; Scarbrough, 2001). Additionally, Deprez and Butler (2001) reported in their research that poor single mothers believed higher education would increase their self-esteem and confidence, open more employment opportunities, and help them achieve their goals. The participants in Jennings' (2002) research indicated that education would lead them to achieve the so-called "American Dream," referring to home ownership, better employment, the capacity to provide for their family without financial worries, and the ability to support their children to attend college. Children were poor single mothers' motivation to pursue higher education with the beliefs that: 1) education would serve as a protection for their children from being stuck with the social stigma of children of welfare mothers, and reinforce their identity as "good" mothers (Jennings, 2002); and 2) poor single mothers would be a good role model for their children to demonstrate values of education by attending college (Dill, 1998; Jones-DeWeever, 2005). However, welfare reform of 1996 restricts access of single mothers on welfare to higher education (Coffield, 2002). The spirit of welfare reform—Work First—emphasized job placements rather than education (Christopher, 2005). Enrollment of welfare recipients in higher education has considerably decreased since 1996 (Jacob & Winslow, 2003). Additionally, Butler, Deprez, and Smith (2004) reported that the poor single mothers on welfare were ambivalent about pursuing high education, mainly concerned whether education would pay off in the form of a good-paying

job in their living area.

One barrier poor single mothers, who strive to meet expectations of a working mother, often encounter is the issue of childcare (Blalock et al., 2004; Rogers-Dillon & Haney, 2005; Roy et al., 2004). Mothers living on welfare believe that work enables them to cover the basic needs for their children. In addition to material gains, they believed that work improves their self-respect and confidence, contributes to a sense of being part of the social mainstream, and gains them respect from their children. Moreover, these working mothers believe that they provide a role model for their children as a hard worker (London, Scott, Edin, & Hunter, 2004). However, costs of childcare and transportation reduce their financial gains from work (London et al., 2004). According to Lee and Abrams (2001), single mothers on welfare reported that wages they earned from their jobs were not enough for their families to survive. In order to make ends meet, most mothers on welfare worked long hours or even had second- or third-shift work. Making arrangements to work these shifts (e.g., additional childcare) added more stress. In addition, working long hours reduced time that the mothers could spend with their children (London et al., 2004; Schein, 1995). Work exhausted the mothers' energy and reduced the quality time that mothers could spend with children. The mothers attributed children's behavioral problems to their work-related absence, and interpreted that children acted out to gain more attention from them (London et al., 2004). The work-family tradeoffs in impoverished families may have a significant effect on children's long-term well-being.

Transportation is another challenge for poor single mothers on public assistance. Most of the mothers on welfare cannot afford a reliable car or do not have extra money in their budget to have their car repaired. Public transportation is the means that the mothers

living in the inner-city heavily rely on to get to work and complete their family obligations, such as picking up their children at school or attending doctor's appointments (Roy et al., 2004). The mothers might leave home early and spend a few hours on public transportation taking their children to school. A lack of public transportation in rural areas even posed more challenges for poor mothers. They are confined to their living communities with fewer job or training opportunities (Blalock et al., 2004). In the research studying persistent deep poverty among welfare-reliant women in rural communities, Blalock, Tiller, and Monroe (2004) further added that an expired driver's license and inability to purchase car insurance are problems associated with the issue of transportation for the mothers.

Both individual and structural barriers prevent poor single mothers from self-sufficiency. Mothers on welfare with multiple barriers may cycle in and out of public assistance to sustain their families (Blalock et al., 2004; Peterson, 2002) until reaching the time limit. Reduction of the welfare caseloads does not mean that welfare recipients achieve "independence" as the Administration expects. Welfare researchers (Bell, 2003; Blalock et al., 2004; Roy et al., 2004) recommend that services such as subsidized childcare, transportation, and education and training that enable poor single mothers to access to livable wage need to be considered to help them achieve independence.

Alternative Discourse of Independence

Subjugated discourses simultaneously exist with dominant discourses. Daily experiences of single mothers on welfare serve as a basis for constructing an alternative knowledge of independence. One prevailing ideology believed by the middle class is that hard work leads to success (Wells, 2002). The dominant discourse that independence is associated with wage work seems to imply that poor single mothers should think of

themselves as wage workers rather than mothers. Yet, as illustrated above, work does not guarantee independence (Blalock et al., 2004; Lee & Abrams, 2001; Little, 1999); moreover, most poor single mothers who work one job or two still remain deep in poverty (Blalock et al., 2004). Under circumstances in which the costs of work are more than rewards, work would not be a rational choice for the mothers (Seccombe, 1999). Furthermore, single mothers living on welfare chose the role of mother as their primary self-identity (Schein, 1995; Scott, Edin, London & Mazelis, 2001; Seccombe, 1999). Being a “good mother” indicated a commitment to provide good care for children. More specifically, the construction of a good mother refers to their efforts to prevent their children from getting into trouble in school and being involved with drugs and/or alcohol, and to improve their living situations (Little, 1999; Nelson, 2002).

Work requirements in the TANF programs devalued the mothering work of poor single mothers on welfare. Ultimately, it trapped the mothers on welfare into a dependency position (Porter, 2001). Resistances of mothers on welfare to the dominant discourse of dependency were explored in a few studies (Blum & Deussen, 1996; Little, 1999; Nelson, 2002). The identity of good mothers was a way to reject the dependency discourse imposed on poor mothers on welfare by society (Little, 1999). Single mothers on welfare viewed themselves as independent in that they did not rely on men (Blum & Deussen, 1996; Little, 1999; Nelson, 2002). They interpreted their creation of female-headed households and independent mothering practices as a virtue of independence. Little (1999) argues that full duties of dependency work should be a legitimated rationale for single mothers on welfare to withdraw from work requirements. Mothering was viewed as an actual valued work that deserved state support (Little, 1999; Nelson, 2002). The construction of mothering as

legitimate work may give uses of welfare alternative meanings. Contrary to the dependency discourse, single mothers relying on public assistance took welfare as an acceptable resource in their dependency work. Welfare was viewed as a means for them to achieve self-reliance without relying on friends and family as well as a right for them to keep up their childcare work (Nelson, 2002). Such an alternative discourse of independence, which indicates that mothering is valued as actual work, empowers mothers on welfare to reject the dominant discourse (Little, 1999).

Marriage Promotion and Dependency Discourse

Background of Marriage Promotion

Although the original aim of welfare was to help white widows and their children, over the past three decades, welfare recipients' base has changed to mostly divorced and unwed mothers (Brush, 1997; Mink, 1998). Along with a change in the population, the public image of mothers on welfare has shifted from help-deserving poor to help-undeserving poor. One prevailing discourse behind the image is that poverty is caused by "wrong" choices single mothers made to bear their children out of wedlock. This discourse implies that poverty is a female-based phenomenon due to the single mothers' moral breakdowns, which result in out-of-wedlock births and depressed marriage rates (Thomas, 1997). Moreover, use of welfare is often viewed as a synonym with dependency. It is believed that the welfare system had reinforced the dependency among mothers on welfare for four decades. To end welfare recipients' dependency on welfare, as President Clinton claimed, "To end welfare as we know it," both the work-first policy and marriage promotion were adopted in the TANF program.

Proponents of the Healthy Two-Parent Married Family Act argued that the collapse of

marriage is a major cause of poverty. Rector (2005) in his testimony regarding welfare reform and the healthy marriage initiative in front of Congress stated, “70 percent of poor single mothers would be lifted out of poverty if they were married to their children’s father. If the mothers remain single and do not marry the fathers of their children, 55 percent will be poor. However, if the mothers married the fathers, the poverty rate would drop to 17 percent.” He concluded that marriage as a protective institution promotes the well-being of men, women, and children, and further strengthens the foundation of a healthy society. Benefits of healthy marriage can be viewed from economical, emotional, and mental health perspectives. Economically, it was assumed that marriage created and retained wealth (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The median income of non-married fathers was \$17,500 per year (Rector & Pardue, 2004). Couples who stayed married increased their wealth more than 7 percent per year (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). The longer marriage lasts, the greater the family wealth. In addition to the economic benefits of marriage, Waite and Gallagher (2000) further made a strong case for psychological and emotional benefits of marriage, arguing that marriage is a pathway to better emotional and mental health. Married women are less likely to commit suicide, experience depression, anxiety, or other types of psychological distress, and associate with drinking or drug problems than do those who were single or divorced (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Married adults are happier, more productive at work, and in better physical and psychological health than unmarried individuals (Rector & Pardue, 2004). Additionally, Rector, Fagan, and Johnson (2004) argue that marriage is a safe place where married mothers are less likely to experience domestic violence than never-married mothers. However, Fram, Miller-Cribbs, and Farber (2006), who studied female welfare recipients’ experiences with marriage and domestic violence, report that married women are associated

with a high risk of domestic violence. In terms of children's well-being, one discourse drawn by the Bush Administration implies that if couples stay married, children would not suffer from poverty, adolescents would avoid drugs, alcohol, and sex, and family values would be sustained (Coltrane, 2001). Basic assumptions behind these arguments are that two earners are better than one and that two parents are better than one (Fitchen, 1995). Marriage is viewed as a means to uphold the traditional value of the two-parent family by some people in the Administration, believing that this family structure further leads American society toward greater success. Thus, marriage, which protects individuals as well as society, is seen as a "cure" to poverty and other social problems. These assumptions are reflected in the dominant discourses.

Critics of the Marriage Promotion

Marriage promotion has been one of the biggest agendas of welfare policies since 1996. It seems to imply that if single mothers on welfare would marry the biological father of the child, incomes would increase, life would become better, and they would live happily ever after (Jones-DeWeever, 2002). The Healthy Marriage and the Two-Parent Family Acts forced single mothers to move towards becoming married, two-parent families. Jennings (2002) reported that the mothers she interviewed did not believe marriage would lead them to a better life. Unfortunately, most mothers on welfare still remain poor regardless of whether they are married and work outside the household (Fitchen, 1995; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002). Critics of marriage promotion argued that the new welfare policies oversimplified relations between marriage and poverty, overlooked complexity of family dynamics (Fitchen, 1995), and penalized women pursuing independence (Mink, 1998, 2001).

Feminists have recognized the institution of marriage as built on patriarchal practices,

in which men are the natural head of the household and women are primary caregivers, and is characterized by inequality between men and women. The promarriage movement, in effect, encourages mothers to depend on men instead of welfare. In other words, men are a substitute for welfare (Mink, 2001). The dependency discourse remains same; yet the only difference between women's reliance on welfare and on men is the object. Dickerson (1995) points out that the institution of marriage as a socially constructed concept is rooted in sexism and largely overlooks diverse family forms and cultural traditions among different ethnic groups. For instance, in a study by Blum and Deussen (1996), African American mothers did not expect to achieve independence through marrying a male provider. Instead, independence that the black mothers defined went far beyond economic means. Space for them to independently run the household was one important aspect of independence.

Moreover, one conflicting message embedded in the TANF program with an emphasis of work-first and marriage promotion was expecting mothers on welfare to be independent as well as dependent. Work requirements pushed the mothers to establish economic self-reliance; however, marriage promotion perpetuates dependence of the mothers. However, mothers' jobs paid minimum wage, with which they still suffered with economic hardship. Under this circumstance, it increased dangerous dependence of the mothers, especially those who experience domestic violence, on abusive men and/or a harmful exchange of sex for money (Scott, London, & Myers, 2002).

Perceptions of Poor Single Mothers about Marriage

According to an analysis of national demographic data from 1992 to 2001, the rate of children living with single mothers has stabilized and even declined since the welfare reform of 1996 (Lichter & Crowley, 2003). Moreover, it was reported that the transition of single

mothers on welfare into marriage was negatively associated with use of TANF (Bitler, Gelbach, Hoynes, & Zavodny, 2004). Several quantitative and qualitative studies had been conducted on poor young mothers' perceptions of marriage. Although most single mothers on welfare did not believe that marriage would be in their or their children's best interests (Scott et al., 2001), they hoped to marry at some point in the future (Edin, 2000; Lichter et al. 2004; Waller, 2001). The postponement of marriage for poor single mothers is to achieve personal and financial readiness for fulfillment of marital responsibilities (Houston & Melz, 2004).

Poor single mothers identified friendship between husbands and wives as an essential of marriage, and they expected long marriages (Edin, 2000). The "right" man defined by mothers on welfare shared cultural aspects of an "ideal" man or a "family man." Economic stability of partners was one of the concerns as mothers on welfare considered marriage. Male employment had a significant influence on mothers' consideration of marriage (Waller, 2001). In addition to stable employment, they were concerned about total earnings that their partner made, sources and regularity of the income, and efforts that their partner made to expand their income. They did not hesitate to end the relationship with their partner if he was not serious about employment (Edin, 2000). Daily survival needs for them and their children were much more important than romance. Another marital expectation associated with stable employment of partners was to earn respect from their community and even to move them up the class ladder by "marrying up" (Edin, 2000; Mauldon et al., 2004). Women on welfare were largely influenced by the dominant cultural discourse that men are expected to meet the family's financial needs. In this cultural discourse, wives' socioeconomic status largely depends on their husbands' status. Poor single mothers are expected to improve their economic well-being and to gain social mobility through marriage. It seems to fit into the

dependency discourse that women depend on men both economically and socially.

Although marriage might benefit women by decreasing mortality and increasing financial well-being (Lillard & Waite, 1995), several issues concern poor single mothers as they consider marriage. According to a study by Edin (2000), the participants reported that economic situations significantly affected the quality of marriage. The poor single mothers in the study would rather postpone marriage until their partner proved his ability to meet the family's needs, or they would find someone else who could. Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan (2005) further identify barriers for the poor single mothers to marriage included financial concerns (e.g., economic stability to meet family's need and achieve long-term financial goals), quality of relationship (e.g., readiness for marriage), and a fear of divorce. Before resolving these doubts, cohabitation became an alternative for the mothers living on welfare (Gibson, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Cohabitation was taken as a step or a transition toward marriage (Edin, Kafalas, & Reed, 2004; Waller, 2001). In addition to economic factors, specific issues, such as domestic violence, trust, infidelity, and use of drugs or alcohol, significantly affected the mothers' consideration of future marriage (Edin, 2000; Scott et al., 2001; Waller, 2001). Although poor women hoped to marry some day, Waller (2001) discovered in her research that some with disadvantaged backgrounds did not have high expectations of marriage. However, contrary to Waller's (2001) study, Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan (2005) found that poor single mothers had high hopes and expectations for marriage. They expected to achieve financial stability and a high degree of relational quality as considering marriage. Moreover, mothers on welfare were concerned that marriage might prevent them from being a good parent (Scott et al., 2001). Women are expected to meet children's needs as well as their husband's needs. Children came first, as

mothers dealt with multiple competing needs (Edin, 2000; Scott et al., 2001).

For a long time, pathological dependence has been associated with poor single mothers on welfare. In/dependence was often discussed from a middle-class, patriarchic perspective with emphasis on financial self-sufficiency, which largely overlooks issues of gender and social class intertwined with poverty. Many researchers investigated poor single mothers' struggles between work and mothering. However, poor single mothers on welfare with minimum-wage jobs still deeply suffer from financial hardships. Moreover, many poor single mothers are on welfare yet are in deep poverty. What should be challenged is the patriarchal ideology of independence fits to the case of poor single mothers. Additionally, further explorations on how the dominant ideology of independence shapes the mothers' experiences of mothering and marriage/relationships are needed. Furthermore, voices of single mothers have been recognized after the PRWORA was enacted but still marginalized in the welfare policy making process. Imposing patriarchal ideologies of work and marriage values on poor single mothers may silence their voices, and further result in practice of social injustice. Accordingly, these women's ideas of independence in their circumstances should be explored and taken into consideration for future policy reform. There is a dearth of research addressing independence from welfare recipients' perspectives. The purpose of this inquiry aims to give voices to single mothers on welfare about their perspectives of independence. I am interested in the ways in which the mothers construct independence through their daily experiences and struggles. Re-constructions of independence in context of this study, by the participants—which single mothers on welfare, are related to mothering practice, marriage/relationships, and welfare policy. I utilize feminist standpoint theory as epistemology and methodology in the study. Thus, this study centered on redefining of

independence by single mothers on welfare based on their experiences and struggles with mothering, marriage/relationship, and welfare policy. The research questions include:

1. How do single mothers organize their mothering work independently?
2. What do single mothers think of marriage promotion?
3. What do single mothers think about welfare policy?
4. How do single mothers define independence?

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

The welfare reform of 1996 has drastically impacted the lives of welfare recipients. Many researchers have been studying welfare since 1996. According to Naples (2003), welfare researchers have examined the following aspects: (1) economic and socio-political assumptions supported by welfare policies, and implementation of the reform; (2) legislative processes, including different perspectives and debates from various groups; and (3) evaluations of welfare reform, including effectiveness and outcomes of the reform. She further pointed out one concern with evaluation research of welfare reform was that assumptions about welfare mothers, poverty, work, and mothering often remain unchallenged. Consequently, unchallenged assumptions may become a product of power that further persecutes poor single mothers on welfare. O'Connor (2001) found researchers' positions problematic in most welfare research; she argued that most researchers have adopted a neutral stance by treating the issue of poverty as resulting from individual behaviors of the poor rather than the existing structure that impacts individual behaviors. Naples (2003) points out that at worst, some of these studies may reinforce dominant discourses by ignoring gender, race, socio-economic status, and social structures, which lead to further oppression of women in society. Christopher (2004) suggested a number of approaches for feminist research on welfare reform and single motherhood. First, welfare mothers' daily experiences should be the center of the research. Voices of welfare mothers with different experiences due to race, ethnicity, social class, and education should be acknowledged and respected. They should be treated as subjects of research rather than objects. Second, women's daily experiences may be explored from macro-levels, including

socio-political influences and power of social institutions. In other words, knowledge about poverty and analysis of welfare policy may be expanded and deepened through studying everyday experiences of welfare recipients. Third, because welfare reform largely focuses on waged work as a path toward independence, the value of unpaid domestic work that poor single mothers provide has been overlooked. Feminist research should highlight the importance of unpaid caregiving work provided by single mothers in the context of poverty. Last, feminist research should explore how welfare policies are built on patriarchal ideologies, and undermine poor single mothers' power in their everyday activities (Christopher, 2004).

The methodology used in this study was informed by feminist standpoint theory. This chapter will begin with essentials of feminist standpoint theory. The context of the study will be discussed, including the researcher's context, assumptions, and biases. Finally, the procedure, including the research participants, data collection, and data analysis, will be presented.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist standpoint theory, with an emphasis on an interconnection between epistemology and methodology, was developed by a group of feminist scholars (Collins, 1986; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1987, 1991; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1987). Harding (1987) defines epistemology as "a theory of knowledge" (p. 3) with concern for who develops the theory of knowledge, how the theory is legitimated, and what the theory presents. In mainstream research practices, researchers must detach from their research participants and strongly avoid any individual biases (e.g., emotions, religious interests, political moves) that might influence an objective stance to produce "good" science, in which research results

reflect cultural- or value-free knowledge. However, from a feminist standpoint theory perspective, researchers' epistemology, generated from interactions of social locations of the researchers, inevitably influences knowledge produced in research studies. For instance, researchers' experiences, beliefs, and training approaches affect data collection, data analysis, and even report writing. Thus, feminist standpoint theory is concerned with who is the "knower," where the knower positions himself/herself, and how the knower knows what he/she knows and does not know (Harding, 1987). Both what and how the knower knows mutually influence each other.

Feminist standpoint theory is not concerned with the development of "Truth" in terms of an absolute universal truth or generalized knowledge that applies to all; instead, it aims to examine how dominant and/or androcentric discourses shape women's lives, and to make public voices of oppressed groups. Feminist standpoint theory acknowledges the ways in which discourses construct materialist conditions of women's lives. Discourses as social control through institutions serve a function to regulate women's lives. For instance, a "good" mother should attend to her children's needs in all circumstances. On the one hand, such a discourse, to some extent, provides guidelines for women to perform the "good mother" role. On the other hand, the discourse can be seen as a force of control that defines and restricts mothers' behaviors. Any behavior that does not fit into this "ideal" picture may be labeled as "deviant." Social controls are powerfully sustained through forms of unification of multiple institutions. Discourses upheld by institutions serve a function to maintain power differentials between social classes and genders. These discourses are not open to be challenged, and are even strengthened through silencing alternative voices. Feminist researchers must examine both how discourses materialize women's experiences and how the

material conditions shape discourses. In other words, feminist researchers should explore expressions of the dominant discourse in women's everyday lives and experiences within different contexts to challenge dominant discourses. This allows both women and feminist researchers to gain more knowledge about how they participate in the social construction of discourses in both destructive and productive ways (Hirschmann, 1997).

A standpoint is not just a perspective that naturally springs from women's experiences (Hirschmann, 1997; Seglas, 2004). Instead, it is a theory of how knowledge is collectively produced through women's awareness based on their experiences and political struggles (Collins, 1997; Jaggar, 1983). Collins (1997) clarifies that a standpoint is achieved through "historically shared, group-based experiences" (p. 247). Realities that social groups (e.g., African Americans, the working class, women) construct vary because of different histories of treatment and oppression, and go beyond individual experiences. For instance, "welfare mother" as a stigmatized social group has long existed. Every opportunity and constraint given to a welfare mother on a daily basis resembles those confronting all welfare mothers as a group. Collins (1986) argues the oppressed, such as welfare mothers, are often situated in an outsider-within position. They should be subjects that social institutions are meant to serve; however, they are treated as objects of programs rather than subjects. In spite of their involvement in social programs, most likely they still remain as outsiders, meaning that their experiences with or concerns about social programs are not acknowledged. In line with Collins, hooks (1990) pointed out that the margin as a part of the whole enables the oppressed to look from both inside out and outside in. Haraway (1991) argues that the oppressed often struggle with how to see and interpret what seem to them to be rational accounts of the world because of contradictions between social messages and their daily

experiences. The struggles that oppressed groups experience with an outsider-within status deal with in their daily lives enable them to generate critical insights about regulations of cultural institutions (Harding, 2004).

Although feminist standpoint theory examines experiences of women, it does not intend to unify all women's voices. Because of differences of social locations (e.g., race/ethnicity, education, geography) and intersections of the social locations, distinctive social experiences of women produce knowledge about how reality and social/cultural institutions are interpreted and transformed in their daily activities (Harding, 2004).

Researchers adopting feminist standpoint theory as a methodology and epistemology use insights generated through struggles with social discourses to empower the oppressed. Moreover, the insights are viewed as a source to illuminate knowledge. According to Hartsock (1983), these insights render existing knowledge more complete.

One feature of feminist standpoint theory is to “study-up” (Harding, 2001, p. 517). Beginning with women's experiences based on their daily activities to identify sources of oppression, feminist researchers study institutional suppression and relations of power to the oppressed. According to Grahame (1998), institution is defined as several interconnected forms of social organizations, such as education, health care, and law. The institution often serves a function to regulate society and justify certain forms of knowledge created by those who may benefit from this knowledge. Simultaneously, the knowledge supports the purpose of institutions. Foucault (1977) not only focuses on analysis of universally institutional knowledge, but also on “subjugated knowledge” (p. 25). One type of subjugated knowledge suggested for study is an elaboration of “local popular knowledge” (Foucault, 1977, p. 26) by marginalized groups. This form of knowledge is often viewed as disqualified and insufficient

in legitimated and formal knowledge. Foucault (1977) suggests both buried knowledge and disqualified knowledge can be an effective criticism against effects of institutional knowledge and power that rests on scientific discourse. Moreover, the tension between local knowledge and dominant discourse provides a threshold to study complex webs of knowledge and power (Haraway, 1991).

From a feminist standpoint theory perspective, knowledge is always socially situated and partial (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 2004; Jaggar, 1983). Haraway (1991) points out that feminists do not intend to theorize the world. Instead, they develop a network of connections to “partially translate knowledge among very power differentiated communities” (p. 85). She further suggests that knowledge is grounded in political and social positioning. Knowledge produced from “politics and epistemology of positioning and location” (p. 92) cannot make a claim on a holistic and objective view of people’s lives. In the light of this, objectivity that most researchers strive for is viewed as a “positioning rationality” (Haraway, 1991, p. 93). Such a positioning rationality enables feminist researchers to acknowledge and value the joining of partial views generated on a collective basis from various positions, and transform meaning of living with oppression and constraints.

Feminist standpoint theory advocates reflexivity of researchers in place of objectivity. The reflexivity includes not only social relations that researchers investigate, but also reflections of researchers’ assumptions embedded in the larger society (Harding, 1993). McCorkel and Myers (2003) suggest aspects of reflexivity including the situatedness of the researcher (e.g., privileges associated with the position), context of discovery (e.g., assumptions, beliefs, and use of grand narratives), and the relation of the researcher to the research participants of inquiry. Because knowledge is socially situated, position(s) of the

researcher and context of the study are required in order to specify how and where the knowledge is produced.

Context of the Study

McCorkel and Myers (2003) suggest three strategies to address the situatedness of the researcher. The first strategy involves an “active attempt to level to the playing field, by dismantling some aspects of the researcher’s identity” (p. 204). Second, the researcher explores the social/political ideologies influencing his/her posture through discussions of his/her assumptions and biases. Last, the researcher examines how the aspects of his/her identity can both hinder and facilitate different forms of understanding. Accordingly, this section will begin with situatedness of the researcher. The researcher’s assumptions and biases will be discussed. Last, the relation of the researcher to the research participants of the inquiry, which includes factors that may impede and facilitate understanding about prospective respondents, will be discussed.

Situatedness of the Researcher

The researcher, a Taiwanese woman, is an advanced doctoral student specializing in marriage and family therapy. I have stayed in the U.S. about eight years. Prior to moving to Ames, Iowa, I lived in Denton, Texas to work on my master’s degree in marriage and family therapy. Although the student population was ethnically diverse in the master’s program, issues of ethnicity and culture were not addressed in conversations in and outside the classroom. It seemed that skin color of each student was overlooked. In other words, the students and faculty viewed each other only as a human rather than individuals who struggle with issues of gender, cultures, and ethnicity in daily lives. I felt like an “insider” in the “human” community when I selectively picked up a lens that eliminates cultural differences.

Reflecting back on the “insider” experiences, I found that one unspoken rule shared in the “human” community was a prohibition of conversations about issues of ethnicity and gender. There seemed to be a fear that conversations about these issues would disrupt harmony in the community. After completing my master’s work in 2002, I decided to pursue my Ph.D. in marriage and family therapy at Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. Living in Ames, a predominantly white community, for three years enabled me to experience “language as a place of struggle” (hooks, 1990, p.153). Although I came to Ames with a prevailing idea that Midwesterners are very polite and friendly, I had a hard time engaging in conversations with people in the community. Because of my cultural background, people in the community often asked me if I liked Ames or the State of Iowa in social conversations. Earlier, I honestly expressed some aspects of Iowa culture that I had hard time with. Soon I learned that people did not appreciate my honesty, and that most people did not expect to have serious discussions about certain issues, such as cultures, race, gender, and social class. Instead, I found that they wanted to hear simple and positive answers from me. In other words, I just had to perform politeness to complete the cultural script. Through many struggles in finding a better way to present “politeness,” I learned to be more aware of contexts in which conversations took place, relationships between me and others, and language I would use. I learned to be “politically correct” in answering such questions. The political posture that I took prevented me from having further troubles in social interactions with people. However, I became silent and disengaged in social relationships to maintain my integrity.

Living in the community where the majority of the population consisted of whites was an overwhelming experience for me because of obvious differences from others in my skin color and accent. I did not feel welcome by the community, and had come to realize that

this community was not my place. I had accepted the fact that I was an outsider to this community, and learned to take advantage of this outsider position. Such a position enabled me to observe cultures of the community, and to learn how community people lived by certain dominant discourses. For instance, local media often delivered a message that the State of Iowa was the best place to raise one's family. Most white residents in the community that I visited with shared this belief as well. However, a few people of color gave me completely different stories. One common theme I discovered was that people with non-white ethnic backgrounds strongly doubted that the state of Iowa was the best place for their families because of a lack of access to services they needed. Moreover, they were consciously aware that they had to be political to avoid touching certain sensitive issues when visiting with white residents. In such an uncomfortable position, many minorities formed sub-communities as comfort zones for them to survive in this larger white community. In their own communities, they created a sense of belonging by sharing their social and political struggles, supporting one another, and creating alternative discourses that they could better live by. These experiences led me to believe that any given dominant discourse was incomplete without incorporating voices of the marginalized.

My interest in researching single mothers on welfare developed since I participated in volunteer work at a local non-profit organization that aimed to provide services to support families on welfare. I was introduced to this organization by my friends who attempted to help me build connections with the community. In my first meeting with a single mother of five children and her circle of support, I realized that the "subjects" the social institutions intended to serve often became "objects" whose voices were not acknowledged by the institutions. The older three children of this particular mother were placed in foster care

homes because of her abusing alcohol. By the time I met with her, she had been sober about six months. The Department of Human Services referred her and her children to counseling. According to the mother, there were twelve therapists serving her and her children individually at the same time. However, this over-service of individual counseling did not meet the mother's needs and goals. She repeatedly made requests for family therapy to her therapists and caseworker, in which she hoped to rebuild trust between her and the older children. Unfortunately, "Nobody listens to me!!" she shouted with tears at the corners of her eyes. But she did not let tears fall. This scenario kept playing with echoes of "Nobody listens to me!" in my head. As I became more engaged with the organization, I discovered that the issue of invisibility was a common experience among single mothers on welfare. Outrage and frustration associated with invisibility are familiar to me in my clinical experiences working with families involved with Child Protective Services (CPS). Parenting is often one of the areas that CPS evaluates to determine whether children would return home with their parents. In conversations with parents referred to me for therapy by CPS, I learned that most of the parents were torn between defending their cultural beliefs about parenting and surrendering to the parenting ideology that CPS holds. Such a dilemma that the parents struggle with should be viewed from a lens of power in relations between the parents and CPS. Most likely, parents' challenges posed to CPS' parenting discourse may result in being labeling as "unfit" parents. Ultimately, their parental rights might be terminated. However, parents' surrender to the parenting discourse does not relieve them from tension of clash between their cultural beliefs of parenting and CPS' discourse. Both cases of mothers on welfare and parents involved in CPS services made me to think of how these "objects," who are supposed

to be subjects of services, could become participants whose experiences and perspectives are valued as much as perspectives held by professionals and policy-makers.

As a therapist, I used to be confident in my ability to “understand” clients. During my volunteer work at the non-profit organization that aimed to provide services to families on welfare in Ames, I was challenged by one mother on welfare whether I truly understood how she felt when swiping the welfare card at grocery stores. On one occasion, I was asked to buy groceries for the mother using her welfare card one time when she was too ill to run errands. This experience opened my eyes and enabled me to speculate about notions of help-reception and dependence. I had mixed feelings while swiping the card at the check-out counter. Although I was not the owner of the card, I felt little embarrassed because of the dirty looks given to me by the cashier and people behind me, and wished to leave the grocery store as soon as possible. On the other hand, because I was influenced by a collectivist culture that views welfare as assistance to survive hardship when misfortunate events occur, I viewed the welfare card as part of one’s civil rights. In a collectivist culture, resource sharing and reciprocal relationships between individuals, as well as between individuals and the community, are part of the cultural norm. The experience with using the welfare card at the grocery store seemed to place me in an intersection of two different cultural discourses—“dependency” vs. “assistance reception”—and led me to an assumption that all understanding is through cultural interpretations.

Social class largely shapes individuals’ experiences and values that influence his/her understanding of others. I was raised in a middle-class family with a strong value of independence. My parents believed that education was the best path toward independence. They especially encouraged me to pursue higher education and establish my own career so

that I would not financially rely on men. Additionally, families in Taiwan, regardless of socio-economic status, highly value education because of a Chinese cultural belief that education leads one to a better future. Parents see it as their responsibility to provide financial and emotional support to their children so they can seek a higher education. Under these cultural influences, I strongly encouraged mothers on welfare to pursue a college degree during my volunteer work in Ames, and found that some mothers quit college later because of a lack of support in juggling among mothering, job, and studying. The conversations with the mothers led me to look at educational issues in a larger context. I often heard from my fellow students, who were married and had children, about how difficult it was for them to take care of their children while pursuing their degrees, and how their husbands, relatives, and/or babysitters helped them with child-care. However, for poor single mothers who lack support and resources, it is not a surprise that they quit college or extended their academic studies over several years.

My clinical experiences working with underprivileged families and volunteer work with families on welfare enable me to speculate on issues of human rights and social justice in society. Before coming to the U.S., my impression of the country was influenced by mass media (e.g., movies, news), centered on an idea that it is a place that highly values human rights and equality. For instance, the United States often expressed their great concern to China about its human rights violations, and even intervened in certain incidents involving human rights issues. I viewed the intrusion as a demonstration of power from a “master’s” concerns about his subordinate. And, I take such intrusion as a violation of the spirit of equality that America is proud of. Moreover, in many cases, I learned that human rights would only be granted to certain citizens characterized as normative and productive. For

instance, one prevailing comment on homosexuality is that the legitimacy of homosexuality and even same-sex marriage would jeopardize the social order and further hinder human development in society. Accordingly, some believe that same-sex couples should not be granted the same rights as heterosexual couples, such as tax-deductions, health insurance, and adoption rights. Another example of my concerns about these issues is the condition of human rights and equality with single mothers on welfare. I learned about influences of dominant discourses about welfare recipients on professionals on some occasions when I explained my dissertation project. One mental health professional shared with me her perception of single mothers on welfare as lazy and manipulative, and further suggested that the government should be more restrictive on policies to end this injustice. She perceived herself as an agent of social change with a responsibility to change single mothers on welfare. In these cases, social justice fades away in the spectrum of patriotism and patriarchy.

From my struggles to be politically correct in various contexts and experiences working with marginalized families, I started thinking of how the pain associated with oppression could benefit me and the marginalized. Moreover, I examined my privileges associated with my social locations (e.g., Ph.D. I am earning, therapist, academic instructor), further speculated on my social responsibilities related to these privileges, and was determined to pursue my research interests to create a space for single mothers on welfare to discuss their daily struggles about motherhood, marriages/relationships, and welfare policies. I hoped that mothers on welfare would be empowered through closely examining their experiences and struggles. Furthermore, their perspectives would contribute to a more holistic knowledge of poverty.

Assumptions and Biases of the Researcher

I was critical of grand narratives that cast single mothers living on welfare as dependent, lazy, and unmotivated. I was suspicious of the prevailing stereotype placing blame on individual characteristics that cause them to live in poverty. In one research poster session, one researcher was describing her research studying predictors of depression in low-income adolescent mothers. After she explicated certain individual variables (e.g., income, education) that predicted depression, I raised a question about the likelihood of certain contextual variables (e.g., social stigma, effects of welfare policies) causing depression among low-income teen mothers. While I explained effects of welfare policies on the recipients' mental well-being, one onlooker started laughing. She gave an explanation of her laugh, "It is just very funny talking about the issue of poverty that has something to do with the Administration." This reaction seemed to reflect the prevailing assumption that poverty should be viewed as an individual issue. Moreover, this stereotype mirrored a cultural belief in individualism and meritocracy, which is related to the idea that everyone is granted equal rights and opportunities, and one should be responsible for outcomes of his/her efforts. As causes of poverty are blamed on individual deficiencies and/or problems, societal constraints and inequality generated from this patriarchic social structure are exempted from examination.

I have been influenced by postmodernism and social constructionism since I started my graduate training. This perspective enables me to think critically about the discursive discourse that functions as a mechanism to legitimate the institutional hierarchy. As the Administration advocates "work toward independence," I assume that social institutions take an enforcer role to fix welfare recipients' characteristics that cause problems for society, and

to force them to be independent through work requirements and marriage promotion. Yet, one problem that needs to be addressed is, “Does the ideology of independence that the Administration imposes on welfare recipients count as independence?” I argue that the patriarchal discourse of independence leaves single mothers in a double bind. If welfare recipients strive for independence by making a decision to stay home to take care of their children under a full consideration of what is the best for them, such independence does not count for “independence” according to the given definition by the institutions. At worst, it is likely that welfare recipients would be penalized by receiving reduced or no welfare benefits. Alternatively, if single mothers follow the institutional definition of “independence,” in effect, such “independence” is no longer independence. Instead, it may count as compelled independence.

People advocating marriage promotion in the Administration have strongly supported the idea that marriage maximizes the well-being of children and women. This discourse poses problems for me for a few reasons. First, based on my clinical experiences as a marriage and family therapist, I believe that the quality of relationships between parents as well as between parents and children largely affects children’s well-being, rather than marriage itself. Parents with relational discord may largely affect their children’s emotional well-being and views of relationships, although they remain married. Moreover, I am concerned that marriage promotion may reinforce gendered socialization for women that domestic labor (e.g., child-raising, cleaning-up) should be their primary responsibility, and their entitlement to financial security is reliant on their husband’s ability to fulfill his role as a provider. In order to fulfill women’s cultural role of “mother,” most of them may have to stay home to take care of children and do housework, which further places women in a

dependency state on men. In the case of domestic violence, it leaves women in a dangerous place. They may not be able to escape from abusive relationships because of a lack of ability to financially support themselves and their children. Last, marriage promotion contributes to the myth that single mothers on welfare do not value marriage. I assume that marriage is concurrently considered by mothers on welfare with other factors, such as an individual's financial and psychological readiness, job, timing, and life plan, rather than determined by pregnancy. My bias regarding marriage promotion is that the Administration's oversimplification of the dynamics in marriage may result in repeating patterns of problems, such as divorce, violence, and poverty, which the Administration attempts to resolve.

Moreover, I assume that children's needs are part of the picture of marriage as poor mothers on welfare consider it. I learned from conversations with mothers on welfare that they were concerned about their children's best interests when thinking of marriage or even romantic relationships. One mother I met during my volunteer work in Ames shared with me that she ended the relationship with a man because of a fear that he would hurt her daughter. She stressed, "I have nothing but my beautiful girl. I can't afford losing her. I will kill anyone who lays his finger on my daughter. Yes, I will." Thus, marriage/relationships in the case of single mothers cannot be considered without their social role of mother. They should be treated as experts on their lives, and respected for their decisions about marriage/relationships.

Procedure

Research Participants

Because I do not intend to create a theory that makes generalizations from a small sample to an entire population, purposive sampling was employed in this inquiry. I sent out

flyers to community agencies in Houston, Texas that had access to families on welfare to invite single mothers on welfare—who were not currently cohabitating with a male partner, were raising their children on their own, and were over age of 21 at the time of interview—to participate in this study. I was asked to give a presentation about this research project at a community agency that provides shelter services funded by the United Way to women with domestic violence experiences. After the presentation, with encouragement from the social workers at the shelter, eleven research participants, ranging in age from 21 to 40 years old, showed interest in my research project, and were willing to participate in the study. The other participant, who was attending graduate school at a local university at the time of the interview, was encouraged to participate in this study by her instructor in the Research Methods course.

Four out of eleven participants were Caucasian, four were African American, and three were Hispanic. One of the Black mothers was originally from France, and came to the U.S. at the age of 19. The number of children of the participants ranged from one to eight. The children who were present with their mothers at the time of the interview were at ages ranging from toddler to adolescent. Three out of eleven mothers had children in their teens. Seven out of eleven mothers were divorced, and all but one had relationships with men who fathered their children. The participants, who were physically and/or sexually abused by their partners or husbands, were recruited from the shelter and had stayed there ranging from a few days to one month. At the time of the interview, all but one participant were not involved in relationships. Five out of eleven participants were never employed before; the other six had working experiences at a fast-food restaurant, a grocery store, a day-care center as teacher-aid, or a medical facility as a tech-aid. At the time of the interview, four out of eleven

mothers had jobs in the service-sector, such as restaurants, grocery stores, and cosmetic sales; two took vacation or maternity leave and planned to return to their jobs after they settled into their apartments; four were looking for jobs; and one was exempted from work because of her disabled child. Nine out of the eleven had a GED, one a college degree, and the other one dropped out from middle school. All of the research participants received welfare benefits, such as cash assistance, Medicaid, and/or food stamps. The length of their receipt of welfare benefits ranged from a few weeks to five years. The researchers' personal characteristics are presented in the following table.

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Number of children	Education	Employment Status
Barbie	21	Hispanic	3	GED	Cosmetic sales
Briana	38	Hispanic	4	GED	Maternity leave (Teacher-aid)
Cassie	24	White	2	GED	Casher at a grocery store
Tilta	32	Black	2	College	Work exemption
Faith	30	White	2	GED	Cashers at a fast food restaurant
Greta	30	White	2	GED	On vacation (Tech-aid)
Lachinita	33	Hispanic	4	GED	Garbage collector; waitress at a local restaurant
Pearl	40	White	3	GED	Unemployed
Lucky	23	Black	4	GED	Unemployed
Beth	35	Black	1	GED	Unemployed
Kim	33	Black	8	Middle School Drop-out	Unemployed

Data Collection

This study was conducted in Houston, Texas, to accommodate my doctoral internship from August 2006 to July 2007. As a newcomer, I did not have access to the welfare population. I contacted different community agencies; unfortunately, I did not receive responses from any of them. It might be because people were preoccupied by disturbances created by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. I was introduced to my first participant through my supervisor, who happened to teach a graduate-level Research Methods course at a local university, at the internship site in November, 2005. She helped me invite one of the students in the class to participate in this research project. After I explained my research project to the particular student, including the purpose of the study, multiple in-depth interviews, and compensation for interview, and stressed that there was no penalty if she would like to withdraw from the study any time, she agreed to participate in the study. Then, I was introduced to the program director at the women's center, which provides both counseling and shelter services to low-income families and women experiencing domestic violence, by a colleague at my internship site in March 2006. She arranged a meeting with board members and administrative directors for me to give a presentation about my research project. A week after the presentation, I was informed that they liked my project and would help me connect to their clients, who were qualified for the study. One social worker at the shelter scheduled an appointment with me to explain the rules of the shelter, give me a tour of the shelter, reserve a conference room for me to meet with the participants, and share with me her working experiences at the shelter. Ten women, who were single mothers on welfare, were recruited into the study from the women's center. Because of my work schedule, I met with them on weekends.

Before the first interviews started, I explained to the participants the purpose of the study, their rights described in the informed consent, and compensation—a 10-dollar gift certificate—provided for their time per interview at the beginning of each interview, and also encouraged them to discuss any questions and concerns with me. After the participants read and signed the informed consent, the first interviews usually began with my opening statement as follows:

I am doing research about single mothers' perspectives of motherhood, marriage and welfare policies. If you don't mind, I am going to tape our conversation. By doing so, I can listen to you instead of taking notes. First, let's make up a name for you, so your identity and privacy will be protected. You are the expert here. I, as a learner, would like to ask you some questions, but please feel free to talk about anything you think is important, even if I don't ask about it. And, if you don't like my questions, you don't have to answer them, or tell me what questions I should ask you. One more thing—if you want to answer off the record, we can turn the tape recorder off, and then turn it on again later.

Following the statement, the participants selected their pseudonyms in the report to protect their identity and privacy. All names used in this study were pseudonyms. After the name selection, I collected demographic information, including age, education, job, hour-pay, marital status, and numbers of children, before we began talking about motherhood, marriage, and welfare policies.

The interview questions I developed as a guide aimed to re-construct alternative discourses of independence through three interwoven topics—motherhood, marriage/relationship, and welfare policy. According to theories and previous research studies, a role of mother was taken as a primary identity for single mothers on welfare. In female-headed families with no support from male partners, mothers may often organize parenting work alone. Accordingly, I explored ideas of motherhood through questions

centering on their mothering practices, such as “How did you learn to be a mother?” “How are you parented?” “What is your picture of a good mother?” “What does it mean to you to be a good mother?” “What would you like your children to learn from you?” and “What values do you believe are important for your children to learn?” Independence was further discussed through questions, including “How do you organize mothering tasks on your own?” “How do you define independence in your situation?” In terms of marriage/relationship, the previous research studies focused on concerns of single mothers on welfare about marriage. However, ideas of marriage that single mothers learned from their marriage/relationships have not been well addressed in previous research. Given this concern, I was interested to learn about the mothers’ ideas of marriage/relationships through interview questions, such as “What comes to your mind when you think of the word ‘marriage’?” “From your perspective, what should marriage be like?” “Where did you get your ideas of marriage from?” “Do you envision marriage for yourself in the future?” and “What comes to your mind as you consider marriage?” In addition, some feminists theoretically argued that marriage promotion discourages single mothers from pursuing independence. Accordingly, the questions I explored with the research participants about their ideas of marriage promotion included, “How do you make sense of marriage promotion?” and “How does marriage promotion affect your thoughts about marriage and independence?” Last, many researchers largely drew attention to social stigmas associated with welfare, and/or discussed impacts of welfare policy on welfare recipients’ daily lives in their studies. In this study, I learned about the participants’ experiences with welfare policies through their answers to questions, such as “How do you perceive yourself using welfare?” “What do you think welfare aims to do?” and “What could the State and Federal governments do differently to

help improve your living situation?” At the end of the interview, I always checked in with the participants about their thoughts of the interview and issues I may have missed.

I completed twenty-one interviews with ten research participants at the shelter, in addition to one interview with the first research participant who did not respond to my request to schedule the second interview. Each interview was tape recorded, lasted about one and a half hours, and was transcribed by two research assistants. I was not able to conduct additional discussions with the research participants to verify themes found throughout the interviews because most research participants left the shelter before or soon after the interviews were completed. In addition, I was told by the social workers at the shelter that it was not possible to track them down because the women were not required to leave social workers and staff their forwarding addresses. Because of one rule in the shelter that all children must be with adults all the time, the mothers had to take their children to the interview with them if they could not find a volunteer babysitter. I played movies and cartoons for the children while visiting with the mothers. Some interviews took place at the outdoor playground or the children’s library in the shelter to accommodate the children’s needs.

In the first three interviews with the first three research participants, I found myself following the list of the interview questions closely out of fear of missing any questions on the list. In listening to the tapes after the interviews and reflecting on the interview process, I realized that I was working with my interview list in order to collect data that I thought I needed for analysis, rather than being with each participant as a person sitting with me. In such a relationship, I found that I positioned myself as a data collector, and left the participants in a position of data generator. The position resulted in self-limitations on my

end in interview process, and fragmented the conversations between me and the research participants. Moreover, when considering power differentials in research relationships, it was easier for researchers to walk away from the research relationship with collected data than the research participants (Bloom, 1998). For instance, as a researcher, I am in a power position to decide how much information I need for the project, and when/how I would call stop. With awareness of both my position in research relationships and the power issue, I changed my posture in the rest of the interviews with the participants. Instead of checking my question list constantly, I focused on being in conversations with the research participants about their experiences and struggles in motherhood, marriage/relationship, and welfare policies. The conversational style (Bloom, 1998) enabled me to pay full attention to the participants verbally as well as non-verbally, have flexibility to explore meanings and their perspectives generated from their experiences, and enabled me to be active in discussions of dominant and alternative discourses. The research was a process of creating local knowledge together with the participants rather than gathering information from them. Additionally, I was more flexible to share with them my thoughts, feelings, and concerns about their stories. The shift in my position in the interviews simultaneously changed the participants' positions and the relationships between us. I found that they asked me more personal questions, told me more about their struggles with the social workers at the shelter, shared concerns about their children and fears about the future, invited me to visit them at their new apartments after settling in, and celebrated their success with me. Tears and laughter were shared in the sister-like-relationships between us.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was not to compare similarities and differences between the

research participants' experiences or perspectives because of different social locations of each participant. Instead, I aimed to present the uniqueness of the participants' viewpoints generated from their life experiences and struggles. I wrote my thoughts, feelings, questions, and comments in my journals before and after interviews. In addition, I carefully read the verbatim transcriptions of each research participant, and then wrote a narrative for each participant that included topics such as their relationship with her husband or partner, childhood experiences, mothering experiences, perspectives of marriage/relationships, definitions of independence, and welfare experiences. While writing the narratives, I kept track of my thoughts, questions, and emotions, and included them into the narratives as reflections. When reading the transcriptions and narratives, I highlighted certain words and phrases, drawing my attention to certain parts of the texts, and made memos for further analysis after each reading. Data analyzed in this study included transcriptions, the participants' narratives collected from each interview, memos, and my field notes. Different themes emerged through repeatedly and carefully reading the memos, narratives, and transcriptions.

In qualitative research, data analysis is a recursive process, from the literature review, defining and refining research questions, data collection, through report writing. Researchers' assumptions and biases inevitably influence the process. In the process of data analysis, I discovered that I made sense and interpreted the data through a social justice lens. This issue became significant for me because I was working with underprivileged families in therapy involved with social institutions, such as legal systems and CPS, at the time of data collection and analysis. Issues of oppression, resistance and surrender, and power became my primary concerns. Likewise, I used the same lens when reading and writing the transcriptions and

narratives in the study. However, I realized that I was over-identifying with the research participants because I viewed them as “victims” of the welfare system. My perception led me to largely focus on problems of welfare system, and further viewed the participants as heroines in their stories, as triumphing over obstacles in their lives. Moreover, the “heroines’ victory” stance might blind me from challenging patriarchal ideologies embedded in “women-centered and women-defined” discourses (Bloom, 1998, p. 63). The awareness enabled me to realize that patriarchal discourses influence individuals regardless of gender and education. The goal of the study was not to eliminate patriarchal ideologies but to give voice to single mothers on welfare about how these ideologies and social policies shape their lives and relationships.

Trustworthiness

In addition to reflexivity that I engaged in regarding my epistemology, theoretical frameworks, potential biases, and assumptions that may affect the research process and conclusions, I used methods to enhance trustworthiness such as thick descriptions, peer debriefing, and a modified version of member checks with the participants. Multiple interviews conducted with most of the research participants gave rich descriptions about their experiences and perspectives of motherhood, marriage/relationships, welfare policies, and constructions of independence. I had documents, including consent forms, the interview guide, and flyers, ready before the first interview. After the interview, I wrote down my thoughts, feelings, and comments in my journals as one preparation for next interview. There was usually a one-week interval between interviews. Before the next interview, I reviewed the tape from the previous interview, and made notes about questions for me and the research participants to further discuss along with brief summaries.

I debriefed and discussed the interview processes, themes, and report writing with the other two researchers—one was my major professor; the other my internship supervisor who was not directly involved in the research project. The ways I spoke with my research participants, interpreted and analyzed the data, and presented the findings were challenged through discussions with these researchers. For instance, I was quite emotional after one interview with Pearl, for she only had 25 dollars to live on in that particular month, and did not have extra money to buy her son a pair of shoes. I was worried how she would be able to make it through the month with little cash in her pocket. After the interview, I was considered buying her son a pair of shoes as a gift. In one debriefing conversation, I learned that Pearl might not expect me to buy a pair of shoes for her son by sharing with me information about her financial hardship. Moreover, buying her son a pair of shoes might affect my relationship with Pearl as well as the other research participants staying at the shelter. Although I framed the purchase as a “gift,” I speculated what the “gift” meant in the context of research interview. In American culture, gifts are given as expressions of appreciation and celebration (e.g., birthday, wedding). In my relationship with Pearl in the context of research, I realized that a “gift” I intended to give to her son might mean “help” to Pearl rather than appreciation and celebration. After being aware of my intention, I held down my desire to buy her son a pair of shoes as a gift with a concern that the action of gift-giving would imply that Pearl was an incompetent mother.

It was difficult to include the participants’ feedback on discussion of my interpretations of the data and conclusion because of a culture of the shelter that the women usually come and go, and do not usually leave their contact information or forwarding address. Accordingly, I always asked the research participants at the end of the interview

about questions I might miss or misrepresent to gain feedback about the interview process. At the beginning of subsequent interview sessions, I verbally reported my brief summaries of the previous interview to the research participants and gave them an opportunity to correct, change, or add information.

After the interviews with all the research participants at the shelter were completed, I wrote narratives (see Appendix B for an example of a narrative) for each of the research participants from my perspective based on transcripts and field notes (see Appendix C for an example of a field note). Data used in analysis included the transcripts, narratives, field notes, and memos. I highlighted words and phrases in the narratives and the field notes for analysis, and reviewed the transcripts if needed. Themes were generated and organized as I carefully and repeatedly read all documents. Additionally, I wrote down my reflections, thoughts, comments, questions, and possible explanations as data for analysis while reading the documents. Conflicting or diverse perspectives were presented in the text to broaden the spectrum of the themes.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Single mothers on welfare have been often treated as second-class citizens. The stigmas associated with welfare recipients include “laziness,” “a lack of motivation,” and “abusing the system.” Because of these stigmas, welfare recipients often develop various strategies to hide their ideas or manage their ideas to adapt to dominant beliefs and perceptions (Dodson & Schmalzbauer, 2005). Such hiding or adaptation may become oppressive for single mothers on welfare. One purpose of this study was to give single mothers on welfare space to speak about what they experienced as a mother as well as a welfare recipient through in-depth interviews. All of the research participants provided their points of view on mothering experiences, marriage and welfare experiences, and further constructed alternative definitions of independence generated from experiences and struggles in their everyday lives. In this chapter, motherhood experiences, including philosophy of motherhood, mothering practices, challenges in mothering work, and perceptions of a good mother will be presented first, followed by their experiences with their partners as well as perceptions of marriage. In this particular section, the research participants’ critiques of marriage promotion will be provided. Next, welfare experiences and critiques of welfare policies will be presented. This particular section will begin with the research participants’ perspectives of “welfare recipients,” followed by discussions of welfare as a resource and critiques of welfare policy. Last, the re-definitions of independence from the research participants’ perspectives will be provided. Changes that the research participants thought could help them move toward independence will be addressed.

Motherhood Experiences

Individuals learn about their social roles and presentations of the social roles through interpersonal relationships from the time they were born. Perceptions and presentations of social roles may evolve over time. Childhood experiences still have significant influence on how individuals perform their social roles in the later stage of their lives. Most research participants had challenging childhoods. Nine out of eleven participants grew up in an unstable home environment where their parents were too preoccupied with their own issues to attend to their needs. Seven of them experienced physical and/or emotional abuse or neglect. Two participants out of these seven were under Children's Protective Services' care because of abuse or parental neglect, and experienced moving from one foster care home to another. One common characteristic among the research participants was that they left home or foster care to be on their own in their early teens. As the mothers reviewed their childhood experiences, their tears were brought up from time to time. However, most of the mothers acknowledged that the pain of neglect or abuse affected their philosophy of mothering, and further helped them become a good mother. In this section, the participants' philosophy of mothering will be presented first, followed by discussions of mothering practices and challenges in their mothering work. The participants' perspectives of "good mother" will be described, followed by their perceptions of themselves as a mother. Then, sources of strength to help the participants make it through each day will be identified. Last, values that the mothers would like to pass onto their children will be addressed.

Turning a Lack of Choice into a Choice—Philosophy of Motherhood

Parental unavailability or abuse made most research participants' youth experiences challenging; however, they took advantage of the experiences in sensing what they could do

differently as a mother with their children. They expressed that they wanted to “be opposite to my mother.” Briana’s mother was not involved in her life. She stressed, “That’s my goal, to be the opposite.” In contrast to her mother, she described herself as an attentive and overprotective mother. She believed that “Mom should stay at home with the kids. So they have somebody there and show them all that I can.” Barbie, a 21-year-old, Hispanic mother of three children, also thought that her mother had an affect on how she would like to be a mother for her children. She said,

She left me. So, that was enough to learn that. I don’t want my kids feeling the way that I did. I feel that I have a responsibility to give my kids everything within my reach, even more. Just the fact that she left me, that was good enough to teach me how I have to be a mother. Not to abandon them and make them feel lonely and sad and wonder who is my mom and what is she like. They have to know who their mom is and what their mom is like, [and] that they know that their mom loves them.

Barbie further addressed the importance of parents being good friends with their children and building strong bonds with them.

Likewise, Greta, a 30-year-old Caucasian mother of two children, grew up on her own. She shared a similar philosophy.

I think being on my own since I was 11 really made me realize that I never want to put my children through that. Not at all. I put them first no matter what. That’s just what I want to do, not because I have to but because I want to.

She gave an example of different philosophies of motherhood between her and her mother.

Greta’s mother told her that “your kids are just kids. You treat them like they are gold, as if they can do no wrong. They’re children. And they’re brats.” Moreover, she suggested that Greta should go out more to have fun. However, it is obvious from Greta’s remarks that she chose to be a different kind of mother for her children.

I want to stay with them [her children] and she thinks I'm stupid. ...I made a decision. I didn't have any examples to look up to in my life. My mom can't understand that either. She's like why don't you go out sometime. Why? I have just as much fun with my children going to the park and stuff like that than I would go into a bar with loud music, smoking everywhere.

She stressed that "it is a responsibility" associated with her decision of putting her children first.

Lachinita wanted to be the best mother for her children. As the other mothers in this study, she did her best to create different childhood experiences for her children from her own. She often speculated about the experiences with her parents and how she learned to be a different mother for her children. She said,

I try to do things different from all the things that they [her parents] did and the way they hurt me. I try to put it into my mind. I just lay there and think and think to myself that I have to do things different, I have to do this and this different. I go and do it different and I see them happy about what I do, so I keep on doing it.

She identified "my children come first" and "being there for them" as the cores of her mothering philosophy. She said,

I try to be there for them, when they need to do their homework. I like to be there for them. When I get vouchers and things for [like] clothes for me and all the kids, I don't get nothing for me. [Instead,] I get it all for them. Whenever we go out to eat and I don't have enough money to buy food, I just let them eat. I do them first before myself cause that's how I was not raised. It's like, it's all for them and just count me out. I put myself out because I'm used to it.

In addition to learning from their childhood experiences, other resources the participants identified helped them be a good mother included media, others' experiences, and parenting classes. For example, Lachinita learned about how to be a mother from TV programs. She said,

Nobody taught me right from wrong. I had to show myself. So, I would look at the people on TV and the things they do wrong and the things they do right. I would look at all the things that they do right. And I would think and think about it and then I would say to myself this is how I want to act to my kids, to have all their stuff in order to be the perfect mom for them.

Kim learned about mothering from others' experiences as well as parenting class. She said, "I've been around people, older people. I've been to parenting classes before, you know, and the things like that taught me different choices." She emphasized the importance of discipline in her philosophy of mothering. She elaborated,

The first time if you let them get away with that, they'll do that. If you don't teach them discipline and if you don't discipline them and teach them right from wrong, they're going to be crazy and they're going to be beating up on you and telling you what to do. In my mind you have to be a mother to your child. The mother has to let her child know that there is a certain boundary that I'm going to take and don't do it again. Even though it hurts me sometimes, I let them know that.

It is worth noting that most research participants did not plan to be a mother in the first place. For example, Faith, a 30-year-old Caucasian mother of two teenage children, was prohibited from taking birth control and using any protection by the father of her two children. As a result, she became a mother by unplanned pregnancy rather than by choice. Likewise, Lucky, a 23-year-old, American African mother of four children, did not plan to have children when she was together with her boyfriend since she was 16. However, her boyfriend disregarded her wish and purposely made her pregnant to keep her in the relationship with him. As a result, she became a mother when she was not ready. Kim's story, a 33-year-old, African American mother of eight children, was slightly different. She used to live on the streets doing drugs and alcohol, and discovered herself pregnant with her first child at the age of fourteen. She left her first three oldest children with their grandmother. She explained,

I never knew it was going to be, because when I was young, I didn't think of principles or more about being a parent. There were some things missing in my life growing up. When it came to it, I was with their father and he wouldn't let me get on birth control. I had all these children and then I turned to drugs because it [drugs] made me feel good and it made people like me. So, I chose that [drugs] over my children.

When she was pregnant with her now three-year-old son, she chose to quit drugs and to be a mother for her children. She elaborated,

It's something I'm learning from, the things that I go through, the choices I make, you know. And I can lay down or I can get up and move and keep pushing. And I just learn from my mistakes and that's what I choose to do.

For most research participants, motherhood was a decision to be an involved mother, because of their childhood experiences, under a circumstance that they did not choose to be a mother in the first place. Such a decision involved life-long commitment to and responsibility for their children's best interests illustrated in their philosophies of mothering. As Barbie shared in the interview, "It's [motherhood] just a way of living. Having a kid is easy but raising them and teaching them is very hard, but it's well worth it."

Mothering Practices

Managing mothering work is often a difficult task for a lot of mothers and even more challenging especially for single mothers. Most mothers organized mothering work around their children's schedules. Their day typically started with the time that their children woke up in the morning, and did not end until they finished some chores after their children went to bed. Through the mothers' practices day after day, a "system" or "routine" was established to make their daily lives run smoother. Tilta, a 32-year-old African American mother of two children, was the only mother attending a graduate school at a local university at the time of the interview. She described that her day often began with helping her son and daughter get

ready for school. Before they came home from school, she had to accomplish her work, such as studying, volunteering, and grocery shopping. She established a “system” to help run the household more smoothly especially for her 7-year-old son with autism. Breaking away from the routine for whatever reason would trigger her son’s emotional reactions toward to her, and then an episode of asthma attack would often occur. Likewise, Greta expressed her longing for “routines” established for herself and her children after settling into their new apartment, and further explained that “routines” brought her and her children a sense of stability. She said,

What I think of a routine, once we get settled in, you know, just going to bed at the same time, you know, 9 or 10 and waking up. And I like to clean house as soon as I wake up and eat breakfast, and taking the kids to school and day care and me going to work and pretty much a routine, boring but it’s a routine. That’s what I want. I like stability and I like a routine.

A routine functioned as a structure for the mothers and their children to build living habits. The participants also created activities for their children to do together. For example, Pearl, a 40-year-old Caucasian mother of three children, came up with activities for her youngest children, who were only one year apart, to better manage and meet the children’s needs.

I just do a lot of activities that bring them together. They’re so close in age. They like building castles. They like to get into chairs and put books on the table and act like they are reading. And when they are done, then it’s usually mommy’s turn to read to them. Usually take a book and sit right behind them and act like they’re reading.

Likewise, Lachinita managed to have all her children do activities of each child’s interest. She said,

My girls like to draw and my boys sometimes they do not like to do that. The youngest one don’t care, he’ll do anything. My older son is used to soccer, football and basketball. So, I tell him ‘ok, an hour for you guys and an hour

for that.' We all get together and we do a little bit of everything. They're happy with it.

Barbie was creative in making a house chore become an activity with an educational purpose that she could do with her children.

We separate clothes and they can help me put them in the basket, you know, sit on floor, put it here and put it there. Teaching them colors helps. The white colors go here because it's all white. And the colors, all the pinks, orange, yellow, blue, they all go on this side 'cause it's not white. That really helps her [daughter].

Being a solo caregiver to children was not easy. In dealing with multiple tasks (for example, childcare, work, job search) at a time, the mothers built routines to make their daily lives structured and stable. Additionally, they created activities for children to engage in to better manage house chores.

Challenges in Mothering Work

Although all of the research participants enjoyed their mothering work, they acknowledged some challenges in dealing with their children. One of challenges most of them faced in mothering work was to deal with children's demanding needs. Pearl found it difficult to manage her youngest children who demanded different things from her at a time. She said, "Sometimes I just have to take deep breaths." Kim explained that her children's behaviors and attitudes would determine whether she delayed or satisfied their demanding needs.

I make them wait sometimes. If there's something that he really wants, he can cry, kick, and everything. But if he's not good, then I make him wait and I give it to him later. When he's good, I tell him, 'oh you can't get it earlier because you wasn't being good,' cause that's how he acts. Or things like how he addresses people, I'm like 'yes ma'am, and no ma'am, and please.' If he says "give me this" or "give me that" I mean, it works as a child and I'm teaching him to appreciate me and ask me nicely. Don't demand me to do nothing cause I don't have to do it.

It was common that young children often threw temper tantrums when their immediate needs were not met. Barbie had a lot of experiences with her children kicking their feet when they were frustrated with their unmet needs. But she interpreted her children's temper tantrums as a message, "To me, they throwing the tantrums let me know that they still need me." This interpretation made it easier for her to deal with her children's needs.

All of the mothers acknowledged the importance of discipline in their mothering work. But being a solo disciplinant was another challenge for them. Lachinita had a hard time watching her children fighting each other. She said,

When they fight or are arguing, I just sit there and tell them 'don't do that.' I don't explain to them about my past or anything, because they're too little. I just tell them 'please don't fight. Just be happy together. You should be happy because I'm here with you. I'm the only parent you have. I'm your mom and your dad right now.'

Briana, a 38-year-old Hispanic mother of four children, further explained the difficulty being a disciplinant, "Staying consistent and okay, you didn't do this. Here's the consequence and stick with it. It makes me feel like a bad person, especially when there's not a father to back you up." Barbie also acknowledged disciplining children was extremely hard, especially when the children compared her with their father.

Being the only one that disciplines them, I'm the only one that has to do it. Their dad just lets them do whatever. It makes me feel like sometimes they think, 'Hey, how come you can't be like daddy.' But I know that discipline has to be there so, that's what I hate about parenting. I'm the only one that does the disciplining.

Discipline styles may change as children grow up. One dominant belief about parenting adolescents in the current society is that parents should become friends with their children. Faith, a 30 year-old Caucasian mother of two adolescent children, agreed that a parent needed to take both roles of parent and friend with adolescents; however, she believed

that the weight of being a friend or parent should depend on the children's interests. She shared a concern about her daughter speaking with her as if they were peers sometimes. She said,

You know, she can't come [to] talk to me like a friend because she is going to get in trouble for some of the stuff she tells me. I need to be her friend but I need to...her best interest needs to be first.

She believed that she had to "be a parent first, and then a friend with her children." Faith and her children temporarily stayed at the shelter after leaving her husband. Her children had a hard time with the rules of the shelter. For instance, all children, including adolescents, needed to be in bed by 9 o'clock. Faith found it challenging to deal with her children's frequent demands of "going home." She said, "He's [her son] like, 'Mom, when are we going to go home? When are we going to go home?' I don't want him to think that I'm going to go home, because I'm not. That's not our home anymore." She did her best to help them in a transition period by talking with them.

Well, my daughter understands a little better, I guess, because I guess she sees how differently we were treated because we were the girls and the boys were treated better you know. Ben, he was mad at me when we came. He was upset with me for a couple of days, but it's better and I know that once we get in our own place and they don't have all these little rules you know, and they can do what they want, in their own house, and it'll be easier. Cause, just when we talk about it, you know, it gets easier.

Pearl's three-year-old daughter, who came to the shelter with Pearl after leaving her ex-boyfriend, cried about going home every night when Pearl put her in bed. As Faith thought, Pearl believed that her daughter would not be emotional if they had their own place.

In sum, the research participants, as a solo mother, acknowledged challenges, such as meeting children's demanding needs, discipline, and children's adjustment issues, but Faith's

remark, “it pays off just to see them smile,” explained the reason why the mothers did not give up their tough mothering job.

Portrayals of “Good Mother”

Having children grants women the social role of a mother. Yet, being a good mother requires commitment and effort. All of the mothers in this study had their own portrayals of “good mother.” Commonalities among the portrayals included, as Faith pointed out, “being there for them and letting them know that they can always count on me, and loving them unconditionally.” Greta gave more detailed descriptions of a good mother.

I feel like you should be there for your children no matter what. I feel like you should let your children live with you as long as they need to, even if they are 30 years old. I feel like, no matter what decision they make or who they are with, whether they are gay or if they’re lesbian or with a black man or a black woman, I believe that you are supposed to be there by your kids and not judge anything that they do. I think that you’re supposed to cook and do their laundry. You’re supposed to make sure that they go to school and you’re supposed to buy them a car when they graduate. That’s just how I feel. I feel like you should always be there for your kids and I always make sure they have good birthdays and good Christmas’s and get the most out of life and have lots of friends and always be the cool mom, letting the kids spend the night you know, letting them eat what they want to. Just being there for them, letting them, not going to bars, not drinking, not getting drunk constantly, not smoking, or having a bunch of men over or different dating.

Brieana added another perspective, “Be a good model for my children. Try to be a good role model and try to provide them with the security that you can whether it be clothes or food, protection from harm.” Likewise, Barbie wanted to be a role model for her children. With the expectation of herself as a role model for her children, she had been more aware of how she interacted with others.

There’re a lot of things. One is that I see myself as a mom and I can’t do certain things. ... I have to be the best example ever to them. I have to dress appropriately and talk appropriately around them and there are certain things I can’t do and I don’t do. It’s not that I can’t do them because I could do them if

I wanted to but it's just the fact and I love my kids so much that I don't want them to grow up to be like just, oh whatever. I have to be the best example for them. I have to be everything I can be for them.

But Tilita, who did her best to provide a good role model for her children, acknowledged that it was not an easy job sometimes. She said,

It's not always easy. Sometimes I'm not perfect. I may answer the phone, and I have piles and different things going on, my bed is not made. You have to practice what you preach so I expect her [her daughter] to be perfect then she's going to expect me to be perfect. She's going to look at me and be like, 'well, she has paper everywhere and the bed's not made, her hair is not combed.' It's not good to set a standard for your children that you cannot live by yourself. ...I used to not brush my teeth before I go to bed. But then the dentist tells her to start doing it. I tell her you gotta brush your teeth. Now I go in there and get my toothbrush. I'll be brushing my teeth and I'll be sitting there and she'll be like, 'I have to go and brush my teeth.' I don't have to tell her, she sees that example. I have to be hard on myself. You have to show them you're improving, as you're growing, you're teaching them.

Being there for their children was identified as one criterion of a good mother. It also demonstrated the mothers' commitment to their children. Additionally, the role of mother seemed to make the mothers more aware of how they behaved and interacted with others in that they would like to be a role model for their children.

I Am a Good Mother But...—Perceptions of Themselves as a Mother

With the portrayal of a good mother, all of the research participants worked very hard to provide what their children needed, be there for them, and protect them from harm. The majority of the mothers thought that they were a good mother but still had some doubts about themselves from time to time. Lachinita received compliments from the social workers and the staff at the shelter about how good she was as a mother. She was proud to tell me, "Everybody tells them [her children] that they have a cool mom, and 'I wish she was my mom.'" Yet, this cool mother had doubts about whether she was a good mother sometimes

because she had left her children at their grandmother's for three years while serving time in prison. The issue of insecurity that her children were experiencing often reminded her that she did not do a good job as a mother. Pearl thought she was a good mother because "I got us out of the situation we were in and I am trying to do better. I love my kids and they love me. I think I'm a good mother." She said, "Being a good mother means everything to me," because

I'm what they have. They rely on me for everything and I do what I can to give them, what they need, and what they want, not just what they need. ...It's not just a job. It is my life.

Pearl had some doubts about herself as well. At the time of the interviews, she was having a hard time with getting medical assistance for her legally blind son because of her difficulty in fulfilling the work requirements in the past. Although Pearl realized that she had already done what she could do, she still wondered whether she was not doing enough. She sighed and said,

Well, there's nothing else I can do right now. I wish there was. I'm just taking baby steps right now. I feel like that's what I have to do to make it down that road. You just do what you can until you can do more. I'm trying to do more. It'll all pay off. I'm just starting with the health needs because that's where I'm at right now. I have to address that, and then I can do other stuff, start finding a job, and have the daycare thing worked out.

Greta was confident in herself as a good mother. Yet, staying at the shelter made her question whether she was a good mother. She said,

I feel like a bad mom for being here [the shelter], 'cause there's so many people and so many rules. And, they [her children] have to go to bed at a certain time. I can't cook them breakfast, I don't have a house to clean now.

Greta, who emphasized the importance of routines as part of her mothering work, lost the sense of being a good mother in the context of the shelter because she was not able to fulfill some of her mothering responsibilities as she desired.

All of the mothers worked very hard to be a good mother for their children, yet it seemed that they always critiqued their mothering work. For example, Faith wanted to be a good mother showing the children her understanding and helping them, but just realized that she might “baby” her children too much. She said,

And I think I babied my kids too much, cause I never, I give them chores, but you know it was easier for me to just do it than...Okay, like Judy [her daughter] we got her on dishes and she was doing dishes every night and um, Ben [her son] was taking out garbage on garbage days. And they just acted like it was so much. So, I didn't make them do the work. I'd tell them to pick up after themselves but sometimes they did or didn't. I don't clean their rooms. Their rooms are their rooms but like once every couple of months I will go in there and spring clean everything but I don't know just helping them teaching them things they need to know.

She concluded, “It [being a good mother] means a lot to me or just feel like I'm a good mom, you know. But moms make mistakes all the times. Moms aren't perfect. I'd like to be but I'm not.” Striving for being a good mother was a goal that the mothers in this study wanted to achieve. The mothers acknowledged struggles and challenges in the process of striving to be good mothers. Most likely, the children might have been benefited by the process the mothers worked through, as Brieana pointed out,

But sometimes it's really hard, because we all have the ideal picture of what we want to be. We all have the picture like that, but in everyday live it's so tough and I wonder if the kids see what you do to reach your goal and to become the ideal person you want to be. I just wonder if maybe they would learn from your struggles everyday.

In sum, although the participants in the study viewed themselves a good mother, they still critiqued their mothering work in striving to be a good mother. Because there is no

formula of good mother, struggles inevitably become part of process. As a belief illustrated above that a good mother is a role model for children, the mothers in the study demonstrating the best role model for their children was how to walk through daily struggles.

Sources of Strength

Being a solo caregiver of children is not an easy task for single mothers. In addition to childcare, most mothers handled multiple tasks at a time, such as job searches, dealing with divorce, finding housing, and healing emotional wounds from their relationships. During the interviews, some of the participants were quite emotional, and expressed how overwhelmed they had been. But they never gave up. One of the resources to keep them moving forward was their children. For example, Lachinita almost reached a breaking point after a car accident. However, her children made her stay strong. She said,

I just wanted to fall apart and didn't want to try anymore. I was in that situation and I just felt like, as looking [back] at [my] life, 'I'm not a good mother. I can't do it. ...If I didn't have my kids, I would let everything go. They're the ones that I look at. They make me stop from doing things I had been and from going wrong directions. If it weren't for them, I would probably go in wrong directions.

At the time of the interview, Lachinita was looking for a job and an apartment placement. However, a felony charge of smuggling people and drug possession associated with her ex-boyfriend's illegal business made the job and apartment search very hard for her. She received many rejections. But her children motivated and kept her going when she fell back to "point one." She said, "I'm not going to stop until I'm there." Likewise, Pearl felt overwhelmed dealing with multiple tasks, including completing job applications required by her welfare caseworker, dealing with her son's health needs, and searching for an apartment. She said,

It's hard. I'm not going to lie to ya. It's hard. Sometimes when I go to my counseling, I just start crying because it's so overwhelming and I'm scared. I'm scared that I'm not going to have what it takes to do it. But I'm not going to give up either. I have two babies. I want a better life. I'm going to do what it takes and it's gotta be enough. They rely on me and I'm really the only one they've got. So, I'm relying on myself.

Kim gave an example of how her three-year-old son made her get up again. She recalled, "When he [her ex-boyfriend] first beat me down, my eyes were closed and my son took my glasses and said, 'Mom, you're still beautiful anyway.'" The words from her son made Kim stay strong from then on. Lucky, through her extreme hardship in past years with her ex-boyfriend, concluded that "these children are a blessing for me."

Some of the mothers also identified religion as their source of strength. For example, Brieana described how her Christian faith was important for her and how faith changed her as a person. She said,

If it wasn't for my faith, I think that I would have already crumbled and given up on life. Even though sometimes I don't walk the way that I necessarily believe in, I strongly believe that my children are saved in God. ...I have friends (from the church), who are very devout, has changed me and the person that I am trying to be. Well, to be loving and forgiving and no matter what happens to you [and] what people do to you, you still have that heart to forgive because God forgives us for all our sins. So, not to become bitter and hating the world.

Likewise, Kim acknowledged how God helped her when she needed it. She believed that her children were a blessing given by God.

Sometimes I feel weak and I have to get back on track. I feel responsible to show what I can do as a parent and think about the future can be better no matter what the circumstance is. And God blessed me with beautiful children who are happy and they're smiling and not crying and it's because of the love that I give them. I don't mess around cause I'm mad. And God puts angels in my way and God knows that I'm tired and God gives angels, something like that, you know, or just like building my self-esteem by the ladies around here, kids around here.

In sum, children and faith were pillars of strength kept the single mothers, who lack support from their partners and families, going to achieve their goals.

Values the Mothers Hoped Their Children Would Learn

All of the mothers wanted the best for their children. They learned lessons from their experiences and struggles at different stages of life, and wanted to pass these lessons on to their children. For example, Barbie hoped that her children would learn the importance of love and respect.

It's most important to respect themselves, love themselves because without them loving and respecting themselves, everyone can do whatever they want with them and treat them however they want to treat them. And I want my kids to know that without love, without respect, nobody is going to treat you the way that you should be treated. I want them to learn that no matter what it's gotta work, you gotta work your way through life.

Faith stressed the importance of respect in relationships. She especially wanted her daughter to know that she deserved to be treated respectfully. She said, "I want my daughter to know that she doesn't have to put up with people treating her disrespectfully." For her son, she wanted him to learn that "it's not right for a guy to treat a girl like that [disrespectfully] and that a woman isn't here to serve you, you know. That is my main thing." After experiencing a long-term relationship in which she was treated disrespectfully, Faith was preoccupied with the thought that she made a mistake by staying in the abusive relationship for too long. She hoped that her children would learn from her experience, "Life is not fair. It's different for everyone, and you have to learn from your mistakes and not beat yourself up and stay with your mistakes." Moreover, she wanted them learn that "Failure is not a person. It's an event."

Education was highly valued by the mothers. Most of them dropped out of school as teenagers. Although a majority of them had a GED, they realized that having a GED did not

help them move very far toward jobs with higher pay and benefits. They wanted their children to have every opportunity to gain college degree because, as Pearl pointed out, “education is everything.” She further elaborated,

They [her children] need to get a good education and just stay focused on becoming the best they can be. That’s what’s going to get them through life. You know, I’m 40 and by the time they’re 18 I’m going to be in my late 50s. Hopefully, I’ll live longer than that. But you know, education is going to be huge for them, because I may not be around that long in their 20s or 30s. ...I think that the better foundation they have now, the better off they’ll be later.

She believed that education would make individuals strong. She explained,

Knowing your ABCs and 123s, you know, it just makes you smarter and it gives you better common sense and gives you better knowledge with common sense and a better path to go down. ...I just think that it makes you a stronger person, physically and mentally.

Pearl’s oldest son, who was nineteen years old at the time of the interview, planned to drop out from the college he was attending at the time of the interview and open a business on his own. Pearl disagreed with his plan and hoped that he would complete a college degree.

I support him because that’s a part of his life. But I wish that he would go to school because I think that 20 years from now, it makes sense. I don’t want them to end up in a shelter when they’re 40 like me.

Faith realized that her children were not interested in school. She often told them,

They don’t have to go to college, but there are career schools, you know. You can just go train to be something because you are not going to make it, you are not going to enjoy, you are going to be working somewhere just trying to make ends meet and still have not money to do anything or live the way you want to live.

Brieana shared a similar view. She said, “You better stick to school and make something to show, ‘cause you don’t want to work like we are working, you know, trying to make ends meet every day.” Beth, a 35-year-old, African American mother of one child, came from a

family that highly valued education, and was planning to go back to college soon. She further pointed out,

Education is very important. With education, you are accepted by groups. Otherwise, you are a part of welfare group. ...If you were part of the college, even for two years, some people would consider your [job] applications. They wouldn't consider you for a job if you don't have education.

In sum, they did not want their children to experience suffering as they did in relationships and to struggle with making ends met. They believed that respect and education were necessary lessons for their children and would lead them toward a better life.

Relationships, Marriage, and Marriage Promotion

Most research participants met their ex-husbands or significant others in their teenage years. All of them experienced difficulties in their marriage or significant relationships. Partners were described by the mothers in this study as abusive, controlling, insecure, angry, drug and/or alcohol using, and cheating. In addition to their partners' personality characteristics, a few of the mothers struggled with juggling childcare and work, because their partner either refused to bring his paycheck home or did not want to work at all. In this section, the mothers' decisions to stay in and later leave their relationship/marriage will be presented first, followed by their ideas of marriage. Then, the mothers' choice of relationship over marriage will be discussed. Last, critiques of marriage promotion will be provided from the participants' perspectives.

To Leave or Not to Leave?—Mothers' Considerations of Leaving Relationship/Marriage

Most of the mothers found out that their ex-husbands or partners were not the right person for them after they were together. However, they did not leave the relationship because of their considerations for their children's interests. Unfortunately, issues in their

relationship could not be resolved despite how hard they worked. For example, Faith met her ex-husband at the age of 15, but did not marry him until her oldest son was seven years old. She admitted that she did not want to marry him because of his violent behaviors toward her; however, she married him for her children. She explained,

When I married him, I knew I didn't want to. But then I looked at my kids and they were so little and I thought I would give it a chance and if it didn't work out they would understand when they got older.

Likewise, Greta had been together with her ex-boyfriend since she was eleven years old. She was pregnant with her oldest son at age 17. She realized that he was not the right person for her but tried to stay with him until her son turned 18 years old. She explained,

Because I want him to see that it's not ok, just because something goes wrong in the relationship then you can just walk out. If you have children, it's a responsibility, [and] you have to stay in it as long as you can unless it's unbearable. I wanted him to be with one woman and I don't want him to see me with different guys. And I didn't want that. I still don't.

Greta tried to teach her son "don't give up" by staying in the abusive relationship with the father of her children. Additionally, she did not want her children to take her leaving her partner as "I didn't want them to not to have their father." But her son encouraged her to leave her ex-boyfriend because he noticed she was suffering in the relationship. Cassie stayed with her ex-husband for four years to resolve issues between them, and hoped that her children would understand that she had done all she could. She said,

We have to work it out. And if it turns out bad, then okay. But I want my kids to know at least we tried, you know. It was none of their fault. They had nothing to do with it.

Likewise, Beth stayed and then left the relationship with her ex-husband eight years after they were married. She said, "I didn't want my baby to grow up with that [violence]. And, I want her to have self-confidence, which I didn't have." She added, "I had to protect my

daughter. I want her to be strong like I was when I was young. Not coming from anybody but from herself.”

Children were the main reason that the mothers tried to make the relationship with their partner work, and then left the relationship with their partner after failing all attempts. Other factors that kept the mothers in relationships included a lack of external support and resources, affection for their partners, and cultural beliefs. Beth said,

I didn't have supports there. And for me, leaving him and going to where I wasn't used to was like going to another country. ...When I met him, he was a nice man. He was [like] a prince. So for me, my support was there, and I couldn't help it, I did love this man.

Likewise, Lucky admitted that she still loved her partner although he mistreated her. The other reason that kept her in the relationship was that “I didn't have anywhere to go. And I didn't want to be alone because it's scary and overwhelming.” Yet, she ended up leaving him when she considered her children's interests. Cultural beliefs about marriage also played a role in Beth's case. Beth, who originally came from West Africa, explored influences of her culture-of-origin on her thoughts of marriage.

In our culture in Africa, you stay with your man. You can't go without the marriage. You can't go to different men. In my culture, it's a shame in the family to get a divorce. That's why I stay with him for eight years.

Promises made before God was another reason that kept Faith in her marriage. She said,

Well, that's another part of why I've been with him so long, because marriage is a commitment. Because once we got married a part of the reason I didn't leave sooner, was, well he didn't let me, you know but always, because I believed once you got married it's a commitment, a commitment before God and you know its not something that you say, 'I do' and then you change your mind and I've learned that you can't, I didn't break my promise, he did.

In sum, multiple factors, such as children's best interests, a lack of support and resources, and cultural and religious beliefs were intertwined as the mothers considered

leaving their partners. Leaving or staying in the relationship was not an easy decision to make and brought different challenges to the mothers.

Beyond a Piece of Paper—Foundations of Marriage

Participants' perceptions about marriage were largely influenced by their personal experiences interpreted from socio-cultural and religious lenses. For example, Faith's ex-husband justified his violent behavior towards her because he thought "He had marriage papers on me, like he owned me. That's how he sees it, like property, 'cause he has that piece of [marriage] paper saying that I belong to him." She further expressed her ideas of marriage,

I think they [husband and wife] should be equal. He's no higher in rank than you are, even though the husband should be the head of the household. I think things should be both of your decisions, not just because he's the man he should have the final say. I don't think he should be able to control you and make you do only what they want you to do.

Coming from her experiences with her ex-husband, Faith strongly stressed an equal partnership as the core of marriage. However, it seemed that she, like many women who grew up in a patriarchal society, held a belief that men should be the head of the household.

Lachinita was mistreated by her partner. She was forced to carry illegal drugs by him, and then ended up staying in jail for three years. She declared that marriage was "a bad thing to do." She explained,

Once they're married, the man thinks he can tie you around his finger, and he can tell you what to do. You have to listen to what he says. Everything changes. Some of the men that I've noticed they want you to listen to everything they say to you. If you don't, it's over or whatever. They got mad and end up beating you. That's what I noticed. They try to treat you nice first and that's just one step they go through, and then the next step that they think they own you, and then the second step, you have to do what I say, then third step, either they're out drinking with their friends, coming home trying to hurt you or beat you. So, that's why I haven't gotten [married]. I'll never get married.

Learning from her relationship and her friend's marriage, Lachinita identified honesty and trust as foundations of marriage. She referred to honesty as "no lies about drugs and no cheating," and stressed that trust was built on honesty.

Respect was viewed as important in marriage. Beth identified respect as a way of relationship, and argued that respect should be distinguished from submission. She said,

For me, one of the biggest issues is respect between the couple and the family. It works that way. Respect doesn't mean submission to your husband. Respect is a way of living. I don't think that it [marriage] works without respect to each other.

Religious discourses may influence participants' beliefs about marriage. Faith adopted a Biblical perspective and believed that a husband should be the head of the household. The job descriptions of the head of household included "providing, taking care of family and make them feel safe." But she thought that men misinterpreted the religious message that a wife shall submit to her husband. She said,

A husband should love his wife as Jesus loved the church and not knocking her around and calling her names. A wife should be submissive. A man takes the submissive idea wrong. A man like my husband thinks I should do every little thing he wants me to do. From ironing his pants to getting up and getting him a glass of tea like I was his servant and that's not what being submissive is talking about in the Bible. So that's not me.

She gave more explanations of submission.

I feel like if the man loves you the way he is supposed to love you, I don't feel like there's a woman who would be submissive. Me, if you showed me that you loved me that much, I would do just about probably anything that he wanted me to do and not have a problem with it. But when he's calling me names and then he wants me to make him a glass of tea, I'd like to put some poison in it.

From Faith's perspective, "submission" is a give-and-take relationship based on love and respect between a husband and a wife, rather than a hierarchical relationship in which a man has power over a woman.

Most mothers stressed that marriage was sacred. Cassie, a 24-year-old, Caucasian mother of two young children, elaborated, "I know that you are supposed to be with that person. There's a bond there that can't be broken." Commitment was brought out as a core of marriage. Pearl, who took full responsibility to work and raise her children when she was with her boyfriend, defined commitment as "each of them is willing to carry half the load to make it 100 percent. They support each other and are willing to work issues out in the relationship." Moreover, communication was viewed as a mechanism to improve marriage. Reviewing the relationship with her ex-boyfriend, Lucky thought that a lack of communication caused great difficulty between them. She found that he was reluctant to communicate with her, and believed that their relationship would be different, "If he could tell me more about how he is and how he feels. He could just tell me like what happened in his life and we can work it out and set up a plan." Beth stressed the importance of communication in relationships. She referred to education as knowledge about relationships and the ability to communicate. She said,

It's also the education from life. He should know about how to treat a wife. The goal of education is to know about communication so he knows about the relationship between a woman and a man. It will make communication easier.

In the picture of marriage described above, participants also portrayed a partner they would like to share their life journey together with; common criteria discovered included having stable a job, loving their children but not necessarily being involved in parenting, and being respectful. Interestingly, all of the mothers but one expected their future partner would

love their children but did not want them involved in discipline. Briana learned from her experiences in the relationship with her ex-boyfriend that disagreements or involvement in disciplining and parenting the other's children affected their relationship, and stated clearly, "I don't want anyone else to discipline my child but me." Likewise, Barbie made a strong statement,

He better not be stupid enough for me to have to make it clear. He'll be smart enough to know that these are my kids, you don't mess with them. I don't think I should have to make it clear, I think he should already know. He'll figure it out.

However, Cassie would like "a guy that wants to be a father." Cassie expected her future partner to actively be involved in her children's lives, including disciplining her children. She did not want her future partner to be like her step-father who "was in the background and emotionally detached;" she believed that "a family means everyone is united. And, everyone has a say in how they feel everyone should treat each other." Since unity of family requires commitment from all of family members, Cassie would help her children to commit to him as well. Because Cassie would grant her future partner privileges as a parent for her children, another key Cassie identified as important was his viewpoint of discipline. She wanted to make sure that the partner shared the same views of discipline with her, such as no spanking.

In sum, learning from past experiences with their partners, the research participants looked into characteristics of relationship, including partnership, trust, commitment, and respect, as thinking of marriage. They expected to share the power of decision-making with their partner. Steady employment, love for children, and respect were viewed as important characteristics in evaluating the mothers' future partners.

Open to Relationships While Standing on Their Own Feet

Although all of the mothers were aware of their ideas of marriage as well as characteristics of men that they would want to be with, they did not consider marriage until they achieved their goals. Faith said,

Right now I'm not looking for anybody and I don't want anybody. I want to accomplish what I want to accomplish without having setbacks. I do hope to love somebody again. I hope to feel loved again. Marriage is probably years off.

Barbie also made it clear that remarriage would not be in her plan until she completed her goals, such as going back to school, getting her own place, having a stable job and transportation, and being certified and licensed as a surgical technician. Cassie did not consider marriage until she reached 40 years old. She said, "I like being married. I love it. I love the companionship." She went on to say, "I want to marry but I don't want it [marriage] to fail. I'm so afraid of failure. I never thought I would fail." She further elaborated on the fear of failure,

It's just something inside of me and I feel like I failed. I failed my children. I failed him [her ex-husband]. I failed myself. I couldn't keep it together but at the same time now that I'm here. There was no way I could keep it [my marriage and family] together.

Likewise, Greta did not want to jump into marriage until she felt she was ready psychologically and financially. She said,

I don't want to be alone. I'm 30. I want to take a couple years off to find myself though, to get settled and get a routine going and get my life together completely and get my job going as well.

Although all of the mothers did not consider marriage in the near future, they were open to relationships. Yet, they had different ideas about "relationships" they thought would work for them. For example, Beth explicitly expressed that she would rather develop a

friendship with a man rather than a romantic relationship because she “need time to find myself.” She described the friendship she would like to have.

When I’m stressed, I’m going to get him. It’s like I’m going to call my mom, or my brother or my sister. I can call this friend to tell him that I’m stressed, that kind of friendship that I can depend on.

Beth distinguished ideas of friendship from relationship. She said, “The relationship means intimate. [However], friendship means someone that you can call or you can count on him or her and give them your confidence.” With a belief that “men will just complicate the relationship,” Beth thought starting with friendship would allow her to learn about the man as well as herself in their relationship. She took friendship, relationship, and marriage as continuous—starting with a friendship to get to know each other, then move on to a relationship in which intimacy might be one of its elements, and then to marriage. She believed this would be much easier because “we know each other, we know the differences like what you like, what you don’t like. So, [when] we can move on to next step, [it] would be easier.” Likewise, Greta thought of slowing herself down in relationships. She said,

I see myself in a couple years maybe starting a relationship with someone but not moving in right away and things that I had messed up before. Not falling in love with him in the first couple of months. Things like that. I want the guy I’m with to have his space and me have mine. That way I can try to figure out the kind of person that he is before anything serious starts or anything. If he’s not the one that I want to be with then I’m just going to tell him to go. He has to go.

Lachinita shared different ideas of relationships from the other participants. At the time of the interview, she was “dating” different men. She said, “They’re all in love with me but I don’t look at it like that. I just look at them for money.” She did not think that she was using the men. Instead, she considered it “being smart for supporting my kids for whatever they need.” She made it clear that she was a single mother with four children, and said “take it or

leave it” in her profile on the internet. She said that the men who kept in touch with her were aware of her situation, and she told them, “If you can’t help me, you can’t be around me.” She was quite strict with her rules. She said to them, “there’s not going to be no sex involved, no kissing involved until I know them for at least 15 or 20 years.” Yet, she observed in the relationships with the men she was “dating” that all of the men went through a relationship too fast. She said, “I wasn’t even talking to them not even a month, and they’re already in love. And, I’m like, ‘Oh, no.’”

No matter how the mothers viewed relationships, their children were always their main concern. Cassie was dating a policeman at the time of the interview. Although she described him as a very nice person, she neither took this relationship seriously nor introduced him to her two children because she “did not want them to see mommy holding hands with someone or getting close to someone, and then it’s not working out and it’s over and then the guy is gone.” She stressed that what she wanted for herself and her children was stability. Likewise, Pearl expressed that she would be dating eventually, but she would not take her children around the men she would date because “I don’t think it’s good for kids to have different people come in and out of their lives.” She had seen how children might suffer from this scenario, based on her sister’s experience. She said,

My little sister, her kids have called three different men Dad in the last few years, because she’s ended up moving in with them and then it didn’t work out and then she moved in with another. You know what I mean. When they say Dad, you have to ask which one to them because you don’t know who they’re talking about. That’s not good. It’s not healthy. That’s my opinion. If it was my kids, I wouldn’t have that. I won’t have that. I think it just puts undue stress on kids, and they have enough to worry about. They have school and they don’t need 3 different Dads. It just sends them a mixed message.

The research participants took marriage seriously, and did not consider marriage until they had achieved their own goals. However, they were open to relationships. The children still were their primary concern as they thought of relationships.

Marriage Promotion as a Solution for Poverty?

All of the mothers would vote “Nay” to marriage promotion. Beth thought that marriage promotion might be a nice idea; however, it was not feasible for her. She explained, “It’s hard when you have children. You’re already committed yourself to them [her children] in your life.” Lachinita did not believe that the marriage promotion that the Bush Administration proposed would work for her. Instead, she proposed alternative marriage promotion, “I’d want to marry myself. My own self. I don’t want to marry nobody. I’ll be more confident because I’m worthy, trustful, and I trust myself.” Greta shared her understanding of marriage promotion.

The only reason President Bush is doing that is to get people off of welfare because of two incomes, instead of one. Nine times out of 10, if you marry a man, he’s going to make enough money to where you can’t be on welfare. I don’t think so.

She added another perspective,

It’s not right to just go and marry somebody, just because the government doesn’t want to help you buy food and medical. No! This is a free country. You’re supposed to be able to marry who you want! I want to marry who I want to marry and I don’t care if they have money or are on food stamps.

She stressed that she viewed marriage as a personal choice rather than a solution to financial hardship. If marriage was for the latter case, she thought of it as “prostitution.” Pearl interpreted marriage promotion as “dependence on someone else.” She explained,

Because they’re saying that if you’re married, then you have two incomes and you can take care of your kids. Well, I want to be able to take care for them on my own because I was with their Dad for years, and here I am. If I was

independent enough and I was retrained and I could support myself, I wouldn't have to rely on anybody else. ...I don't want to be dependent on somebody else to take care of my kids. So, if I'm going to go through all this with welfare, give me some retraining and help me to become independent not dependent on something else. I'm just going from one thing to another. I'm going from food stamps and TANF to a man. I want to be able to support myself and my kids.

From Pearl's perspective, marriage promotion made single mothers retain a status of dependence—the only difference was that they depended on a man instead of welfare. She gave an example of her mother to indicate that marriage might seem to be a “solution” to poverty, but in effect, it did not change her status of dependency, and further posed another problem for her mother. Her mother used to be on welfare and raised five children on her own. Pearl recalled that her mother could not support the family with minimum wage, and they lived in deep poverty until her mother married her husband. She described that her step-father “had a good job and money and got us out of it and saved us from poverty,” but her mother went through a lot of unhappiness for it. In her parents' relationship, Pearl thought that her mother always compromised for her step-father. She said,

He was the one with money and he was the one that decided what they did, where they ate and vacationed, and everything, even the everyday stuff. ...She [her mother] didn't get to enjoy live like she would have if it had been her decision or if it wouldn't have been such a one-sided relationship.

Marriage might help with financial hardship in the case of Pearl's mother, but it made her suffer in the marriage.

Cassie thought that helping poor single mothers with a grant to stand on their own feet would be needed rather than promoting marriage. She said,

Like me, you know. I was married and I didn't think that I was ever going to be a single mother, you know. Everything I worked through and now I'm a single mother and now you're going to tell me to go get married. I still think that I'm going to marry a man who is like my ex. It's just going to end up in

divorce anyway and I'll be in the same place. He [President Bush] needs to support single mothers to be on their feet. He needs to not be supporting marriage. He needs to be supporting the women, give them a grant.

She critiqued marriage promotion as encouraging single mothers to depend on men.

You don't want women to go into that kind of life [divorce and poverty], you know? He should be helping single moms by just helping. He's not promoting incentives. He's promoting incentives on a man. He's like, get married, you won't be poor anymore because the man will take care of you. That's what I take that message. We don't choose to be on welfare. We're thankful that's its there so that we aren't out on the street, you know. How can he say go get married and go depend on a man. We shouldn't depend on men. We should be able to depend on ourselves and out government when needed.

In sum, the participants in the study thought marriage was not a solution for poverty.

And, worst of all, marriage promotion rendered them dependent on men instead of welfare.

Welfare Experiences and Critiques of Welfare Policy

All of the participants had been on welfare from one month to seven years.

Their experiences with welfare will enrich knowledge about impacts of welfare policies on their self-identity and family relationships, and revisions of welfare policies. In this section, the participants' view of "welfare recipients" will be presented, followed by discussions of what welfare means to the participants. Last, critiques of the participants of welfare policies will be addressed.

Understanding "Welfare Recipients" from Their Perspectives

The research participants were aware of societal stereotypes associated with single mothers on welfare. A few mothers expressed their views of these stereotypes. Briana described two types of welfare recipients, "Women and people who are trying to make it on your own but you just can't do it, and women that choose to stay at home and just be with

their kids and be on welfare.” She further elaborated on the attitudes held by the two types of women.

It all depends on your attitudes about it. If you go in with an attitude that I’m getting this free stuff and let me take advantage of it, whereas, yes, I’m out of luck right now, and I can’t work or I can’t afford to feed my family. Then you have to let your pride go out the window and actually go and ask for assistance. I think it’s just the attitude of a person.

Barbie was also aware of the societal stereotype on welfare mothers, and did her best to distance herself from this “category.” She said,

People who see others on welfare, they just think that people are lazy and are just getting free money and it’s for free food or whatever, ‘cause I see people who do act like that. But I don’t understand struggling through those things and then just staying at home and being with their kids. I know that I have this [welfare] right now but I am looking for a job. I’m out there trying to find something better than just staying home and say ‘oh, I have foods stamps don’t worry about it.’ I think that we should always try to better ourselves. Take care of the family and don’t just depend on other things. I’m not going to let that happen.

Greta attributed the welfare recipients “who just want to stay home and be with their kids” to the notion of freedom in American culture. She elaborated,

It just seems like it’s so free to do whatever you want to do. You can have as many children as you want no matter if you’re on welfare. ...Here you can have 30 children and still be on food stamps and welfare. Things like that. There’s just too much freedom. ...Some people stay on it [welfare] for years and it’s just not right because they don’t work and they don’t care. And, they stay in these kinds of houses and apartments, and they pay like \$20 a month, and they get somebody to pay for their phone bill and their light bill. They get money for their food and their bills.

She distinguished herself from the type of welfare recipients who just stayed home to be with their children. She said, “I have a job and pay taxes.” She added, “I am trying really hard to buy my own groceries and medical.” Yet those recipients who stay home to be with their children may have reasons to choose this option. Tilta’s case might be an example of why

she had to stay home and be with her children. She was completing a master's degree at the time of the interview, had work experience and job-skills training, but was still on welfare because of her autistic son. She stressed that she would rather work than stay home. She also realized that it was hard for her to get a job that would give her a great deal of flexibility with time and work scheduling to meet the demanding needs of her son. Welfare seemed to be the option for her. She explained,

Welfare is a thing that I have had to be on cause like I said my son is disabled. Even though you have an education and you have the skills and the training, if you don't have the partner that's here to help you, you have to probably step back and be here for your kids. That's most important for me is to be here for my son. Therefore, even though I have the training, I can't just leave my son with just anybody, he can't talk and tell me what's going on with him. I can't afford to just say 'ok, I'll call a nanny to live in my home.' So, I have to stay on welfare until I can come up with a system.

Each of the mothers in the research project had different reasons to stay on welfare. Yet the societal dominant stories about single mothers on welfare often marginalize their voices and trivialize their efforts. All of the mothers worked very hard to stand on their own feet. They also wished to be understood more. Greta said, "Everybody in their life has problems. And no matter how much you try to shade it out or pretend like you don't, you do. And nine times out of ten, people have problems." She added,

Like me, not all of us are taking advantage of the system and not all of us are trash and not all of us do drugs. There're a lot of girls who don't care, but there are a lot of girls who do care. They're on the computer and they're trying to take classes. They walk 5-10 miles [to work]. They're trying. ... You can't judge people because you never know their situation. Just treat us like we're people.

Kim thought that single mothers on welfare were often "stuck in the stigma" and viewed as dependent because of a lack of understanding by society. She explained how she was compelled to be dependent on her ex-boyfriend in the relationship,

For me, it was like the situation where I wasn't being independent. I had a man. He didn't want me to work and didn't want me to do nothing but had that feeling [of dependency], cause I didn't want to get beat up. ...I was dependent on him, I didn't go to work, and I didn't have a job. It wasn't that I didn't want to. I was in a situation where I was confined. It was like I was in jail.

Pearl wished to be understood by policy makers about how the poor struggle to make it every day. She said, "I'd like for Present Bush to come and live my life. I'd like him to see what I have to do everyday to make it through one day." She further explained,

I want him to try and find a job when you don't have a phone or try to take two kids with you to find a job and show the employer that you don't have a phone to call you back on. ...I don't think that he realizes just what we go through, just to make it through a day on welfare. A day on the life of someone on welfare is really hard. How could he go apply for 18 jobs a week with a legally blind son and Jessica [her daughter] with a double stroller with no bus service and I live in a shelter.

She used to live on \$25 for a month. It was extremely hard for her and her children. She also wished for President Bush to "try to live on \$25 a month or tell your son that he doesn't have shoes for another month."

In sum, the mothers in this study distinguished themselves from the social stereotypes by putting efforts in to their search for employment. However, their efforts to better themselves are not recognized by society. Yet, one issue emerging from the conversations with the participants was, "What efforts do society or policy makers have to make to understand them differently?"

Using Welfare as a Resource Rather Than a Way of Living

Welfare is often criticized as encouraging recipients to stay on it as a way of living. The framework of "welfare as a way of living" often results in blaming welfare recipients. The single mothers in this study stressed that they used welfare as a means to help raise their

children in a period of transition. For example, in one interview with Briana, I used “receiving welfare” or “being on welfare” in my questions for her to explore her definition of independence. But she replied, “I use welfare to make sure certain needs are met. ... Well, I am using welfare. I wish I didn’t have to use welfare.” It was obvious that there was a difference between “being on welfare” and “using welfare” for her. She explained the use of welfare as help at the time she needed it. She said,

I believe that it’s system. That’s there to help you whenever you are in need. But I know that a lot of women take advantage of it but I truly believe in the system that it should be there when you need it. ... They should use it but not rely on it all the time.

She believed that welfare should be seen as “a back-up thing.” Barbie elaborated how she used welfare as one of the methods to help her children.

I think it’s [welfare] a good thing that is out there because I know that when something happens, it is going to be hard to make ends meet. Insurance is a hard thing to get too, you know, especially for my kids to have insurance, because my kids don’t have that really. I think that it’s a good thing that’s out there for mothers like us. If I didn’t have food stamps, my kids are going to be hungry. I’ll find a way to get food to them. It’s [welfare] one way that I feed them without having them go to different houses or go do whatever.

Likewise, Kim viewed welfare as a means to help her move toward independence. She said,

Welfare is right now a means to help me, to help me to get to something more set in stone, to where it’s going to help me with the childcare. There’s nothing to live on. Rent is like six hundred something at least. And it’s [welfare] something to help me out right now and the resources for what they give me, like the work-force and doing this. It’s going to help me to where I can learn my independence, get the training, have healthcare for my kids and learn how to live life on my terms, you hear me, learn to live independently. That’s why I say that it’s doing it. I’m not saying this is what I want to do for the rest of my life and I don’t feel like I have to go do this. I’m using it as a stepping stone instead of a stumbling stone.

Although the mothers used welfare as a resource, they felt ambivalent toward it. For example, Pearl expressed that on the one hand, she appreciated the welfare benefits that

helped her take care of basic needs of her children, but on the other hand she wished she did not need to use welfare. She said,

I thank God for it [welfare] because without it I would have nothing. I was able to take her [daughter] to the dentist this morning. I wouldn't have been able to do that without Medicaid and you know, without UT&D [a medical facility] which is where I went and got his [son] shots two weeks ago. If it wasn't for that government program, I wouldn't have been able to get it because I had no money. It helps me to get where I need to go absolutely. If I weren't for that, I wouldn't be able to do any of that stuff.

But she added, "I couldn't do it without it, but I don't want it at the same time." All of the mothers expressed a similar dilemma and hope to get off of the welfare systems and to be independent soon. Faith said,

Some people just want to, you know, get as much as they can out of it. I don't like being on it, I want to depend on myself. I want to provide for my family. I want to do more than what you can do just being on welfare. I don't want to stay on \$5.25 an hour just so I can just have some food stamps and some cash assistance. It's not worth it. There is a whole bigger world out there.

Paradoxically, the feelings of independence and dependence were associated with use of welfare. She elaborated, "They [welfare benefits] are helping me be independent by me not having to be dependent on my husband. But I feel like a dependent because I need that [welfare] to survive right now." Both Greta and Cassie took welfare as one resource to make sure their family's needs are met. But they felt embarrassed using the welfare card. Greta said, "It's not easy because when you go into a grocery store, for me, it's embarrassing to pull out a card to pay for things. I don't like it. It's a little bit degrading." The welfare card seemed to symbolize a stigma associated with welfare recipients. Cassie expressed a similar feeling as Greta. She grew up on welfare for a few years, and recalled how her mother felt embarrassed with it. She remembered that she and her mother always brought groceries at another town because of feelings of embarrassment and fear of how their neighbors would

view them using food stamps. Since Cassie was using welfare to help raise her children, she said that she completely understood how her mother felt when she was on welfare. But she took the use of welfare as a reminder for herself of working hard. She said,

It opens my eyes, when I have to swipe that card, it's like swiping a bank card, you know what I mean. It reminds me every time that I'm not doing something right. I need to keep moving, you know. I need to work on my goals a bit harder, you know?

She further elaborated on the meaning of swiping the welfare card. She took it as a message that "I don't feel independent. I don't feel like I'm taking care of myself." She further used welfare as a reminder as well as a motive in the sense that "it reminds me that it [welfare] isn't permanent, this isn't my future and isn't going to be my whole life. It motivates me to keep looking forward." She viewed welfare as a "kick me in the butt and I'll go" rather than "a crutch." Furthermore, Cassie did not want her children to forget their experiences on welfare. She said,

I don't ever want them to forget where they come from. I don't want them to ever look down someone [on welfare]. I want them to always be willing to help. I want them to know that my mom struggled, my mom worked her butt off, you know, my mom didn't have an education until she was 25 years old, you know but she still took care of us and she still loves us and look at her now. I want my kids to know. You know? Yeah. I want my kids to know everything that they've gone through, you know? It's for them and I want them to know that it's ok, you can fall down and you can get picked back up.

The participants were aware of societal stereotypes associated with welfare but viewed their use of welfare differently from society's dominant perspective of welfare recipients. They stressed that welfare was one of the resources to help them on the path toward independence.

Critiques of Welfare Policies

The welfare reform of 1996 strongly advocated paid work toward independence. Such an ideology has been reinforced by the Bush Administration through work requirements. All

of the research participants expressed that in addition to education, work would help them get through financial hardships and lead them toward independence. But most of them experienced difficulty with the job search. For instance, both Barbie and Pearl said that a lack of reliable child-care hindered the progress of their job search. Barbie had submitted a lot of job applications to a variety of business facilities, such as babysitting and car washing, but did not receive one interview from any of them. She stressed that she did not care about the type of job she got, “It doesn’t matter as long as there’s something I can do that I’m going to do to be able to make income and to get on my own feet and support my kids.” She further identified what caused the difficulty getting a job.

If you walk in to get a job and you have your kids with you, I feel like they’re like, ‘wow, she can’t find a baby sitter. So, if she can’t find someone to take the kids while she looks for work, why should we hire her, what if she can’t find someone to take care of her kids while she’s working. Is she going to be a bad asset to my company and will I regret it?’ That’s probably one of the reasons why I’m having trouble because I just won’t leave my kids to just anybody.

Likewise, Pearl experienced a similar issue as she was looking for a job. She said,

Oh, they’re [employers] not going to hire me. They won’t hire me if I take two kids in there to get the job. They’re not. They’re going to look at me and say, ‘Well, why are you bringing your kids to go and look for a job?’ That’s how I would feel if I saw somebody. It doesn’t look good. It’s not professional, you know, even for a Jack in the Box job or a fast food restaurant. The first thing they’re going to think is, ‘Well, she doesn’t have day care. If I’ll hire her, what’s she going to do? Bring the kids to work?’ That’s exactly what they’re going to say. It’s basically going to be applying at a bunch of places they are just going to say no anyway, because I have two little kids with me.

The mothers were aware that jobs did not guarantee that they would be able to achieve independence. Cassie found a job at a grocery store as a cashier, and would be paid six

dollars an hour without health insurance and other benefits. She was concerned how she was going to raise her children on minimum wage and with no medical benefits. She said,

You can't be independent if you don't have insurance. How are you going to get your kids to the doctor but you can't pay for insurance and you're getting paid \$5 an hour? I don't understand how the government, how Americans want everyone to do all this stuff [to be self-sufficient] but at the same time, still pay them \$5 an hour. It's much better for everyone to be independent and to have their own car and a cheap house. That's part of our lifestyle. If you're supposed to do that on \$5 an hour being a single mother, with 2 kids, it's not going to happen. It's outrageous.

She did not believe that there was a way poor single mothers earning minimum wage would reach a standard lifestyle meaning being able to own a house, taking care of herself and her children, and sending them to college. She referred to it as the "American Dream." She said, "We want that. But it's kind of like, it's hard. We strive for it and at the same time we know that it is out of our hands. We're not going to reach that." Pearl further pointed out that minimum wage plus welfare benefits would not help her become self-sufficient. She explained,

How, when you live on \$200 a month, can you come up with a \$250 light deposit for \$200 [cash assistance]? That is the standard deposit right now whether you have great credit or not. It's \$200. I paid \$200 out of my TANF for my light deposit or for the light bill, which is even higher than that. How am I going to pay for my day care when I make \$5.25 an hour? Do you know what I mean? It's just an ongoing struggle.

Pearl doubted whether welfare aimed to help the poor get out of poverty. She said, "I don't know that they'd want us to get out of poverty. They just don't want us to be starving to death on the streets."

A few of the mothers in the study could be exempted from the work requirements because of their child's disability. Pearl could have been exempted from the work requirements but found out about a work penalty against her a day before the second

interview with me. She explained to me that she was on TANF two years ago, and worked at a fast food restaurant 34 hours a week, which was three hours away from the work requirements. She said the caseworker told her that “the job I had before wasn’t good enough, even though I was working 34 hours a week.” What she made sense of “not good enough” was:

They don’t care how much I made, just how many hours I had. I could have been babysitting for \$25 a week or \$10 a week as long as it was 37 hours. Because I was working 32-34 hours a week, making \$5.15, it wasn’t good enough and they’re penalizing me for it now.

What she had to do to make up for this work penalty was to do a job search at 18 places a week for four weeks. Then, she was told by her caseworker that she would be eligible for full welfare benefits and the work exemption after completing all job applications. As a matter of fact, Pearl did not ask for the work exemption. Instead, she asked her caseworker to help her gain an education or training. But she was disappointed at her caseworker’s response to her request, “she said go ahead and do this [18 job applications per week for a month], and get that form filled out from the medical clinic for the exemption so you don’t have to work.” Pearl had to surrender to this requirement to acquire medical benefits for her children. She said,

You just have to do what they tell you or they’re not going to help you, even though it’s unreasonable for me to take a double stroller and apply at 18 places a week. Those places are going to look at me like I’m insane, because I have my kids with me. I’m still going to do it because I have to do it to satisfy their needs.

Tilta was exempted from the work requirement because of her autistic son. But she did not believe that the work exemption would benefit her. Instead, it made her more dependent on the system. She explained,

They said, 'ok she can't work because of her son and everything and she needs to be there for him.' But what happens to me? I don't have a way out. So, I have to depend on the system. I don't have an exit. I can't give up. I'm getting my degree. I'm going to college, I'm doing the whole thing but where am I going to be able to use those things [education and job skills]?

At the time of interview, Tilta was going to graduate from college with a master's degree in business leadership the following semester. She planned to stay in college to work on another degree. She said,

I don't have nothing but school. I graduate in May but I'll be right back [to school], 'cause if I don't have school, I don't have nothing. I don't have a husband, a job, money. So, school is all I got. If I just stop, then I won't know what to do when I finish my master's degree in May.

Both Tilta and Pearl thought that childcare specializing in caring for children with special needs would greatly help them rather than the work exemption.

Welfare policies affected the number of hours that the recipients should work, and therefore it greatly shaped their lifestyles. For example, Beth perceived welfare as a control over as well as support to women's lives. She explained that welfare supported the poor in the sense that it gave them a start, yet it also had control over how they should live their lives. She gave an example,

They only gave you \$200 dollars a month. What can you do with that in this country? Additionally, I had a car one time. It was a bad car. They [welfare caseworkers] said that they can't help you if you have a car. They asked me to sell my car in order to get welfare benefits. But, if you don't have a car, what can you do? You can't move on in that way. It just made me dependent on welfare.

In Beth's case, it seems that the welfare policies determined what she could and could not own. Pearl further discussed about how welfare affected the eating habits of people living in poverty. She said,

You cannot eat healthy on food stamps. You cannot buy vegetables. And people look at them crazy when they're on food stamps 'cause they are buying all that junk. Fresh vegetables and all that stuff are expensive. And even canned vegetables are expensive, I mean, this store down here, they're like 85 cents a can or 79 and if you buy 30 cans of that, that is \$25 of your food stamps for the month for 1 can of vegetables a day for you and your family. Well, I only get \$187 a month so if I was buying food for a meal, I cannot buy 30 cans of vegetables and then still get meat and drink or whatever. That's why you see a lot of people on welfare buying you know junk, because it's cheaper and it goes farther.

All of the mothers in the study took welfare as a resource to help them move toward independence, yet they experienced challenges with meeting welfare requirements while using welfare to stand on their own feet. Welfare aims to help the poor to become independent. Ironically, however, the welfare policies did not leave the mothers much independence to decide, for example, the number of hours they wanted to work, or property they could own.

Redefining Independence

The dominant discourse of independence regarding welfare largely focuses on financial self-sufficiency; in other words, individuals are only to rely on themselves rather than outside assistance to get their needs met. First, the research participants' perspectives of independence generating from their daily experiences with mothering and relationship/marriage will be discussed and follow by areas they identified needed to improve on a path of independence. Last, changes could be made about welfare policy from the research participants' views will be presented.

Financial Self-Sufficiency as a Means to Achieve Psychological Independence

The mothers in this study viewed independence in two regards: financial and psychological. Although it seems that the financial aspect of independence was in accordance

with the dominant view of independence (e.g., house, job, car), the mothers viewed that psychological independence (e.g., a sense of stability, independent care of children, a sense of power in relationships) was built on financial independence. For instance, Pearl defined independence as “having our own home, and not being dependent, because it’s ours. It’s our life. Just having our own life.” She said,

Independence is when I am able to have my own place and I have a job and I can take care of my kids. Then I don’t have to rely on anybody to help me. I know that I can do it on my own. ...I don’t want to rely on a card every month to get food for my babies. And I don’t want to rely on a shelter to put a roof over our heads. I want to be independent and have an apartment or a trailer or a house or our own whatever, our own room.

Striving for possession of a house or job meant the ability to provide her children a sense of stability, as she added,

I want stability with them [her children]. I want them to feel stable. I don’t want to have them worry about going to sleep in a strange place. I don’t want to go to sleep in a strange place either! I want my own bed and pillow.

Likewise, Cassie defined independence as “being on my own” and independently taking care of her children. She said,

To be on my own, taking care of my kids, helping them, being able to help them when they’re older and when they’re my age and they’re in this situation. I want to be able to help them so that they don’t have to depend on anyone else but me. Taking care of yourself and not having to depend on others, not having to ask for help, you know. ...I want to be the one that my kids turn to.

In most cases of domestic violence, women were compelled to be dependent on men because they were financially and socially isolated by their partners. Financial independence gave the mothers a sense of power in relationships. For example, Beth stressed the importance of financial independence for women in relationships. She said, “With financial independence, women can give. I don’t have to beg him. I don’t want him to feel he owns me or controls my

life.” She suggested that women take a full-time job in addition to taking care of children, to help her partner to support the family. She strongly believed that financial independence would give women power to be able to be equal in relationships. Embedded in Beth’s idea was that financial independence would help women achieve psychological independence.

Moreover, independence involved not having to depend on anybody to make decisions for them. Although Faith stressed that she wanted to have a better life, meaning a stable income source and possession of a house and a car, she stressed the importance of the ability to make decisions and be in charge of her life in her definition of independence.

Cause you’re used to being dependent on somebody, you’re used to somebody. I was used to somebody telling me what to do, when to do it, [and] when I couldn’t do it. I never got to make any decisions on my own. I am independent now because I get [to] make them now. It’s me now. I don’t have to listen to somebody else. I don’t have to have their permission. So, I am the only person that can take me on.

Likewise, Barbie defined independence as “making my own choices.” She said,

I have to make my own choices and not have someone else make them for me. I have to do what I have to do and accept what the right thing to do is. I make the choices that I know are the right choices.

Some of the research participants made “not depending on someone else” more specific in reference to not relying on men. For example, Briana defined independence as “being independent of a man.” She said, “I would love to be able to get out there on my own, and take care of my children. And, it would be nice to have a partner, but not dependent on him for stuff.” Likewise, Lucky expressed that “I have to rely on myself rather than him. I would need more confidence to prove I can do it on my own.” Similarly, Kim elaborated her idea of independence as “the confidence that you know you can do it.”

I have to do things on my own. I can do this, you know? I have the confidence to know that I can do this. I’ve tried it this way, I’ve tried it that way, but I’ve

never tried it on my own, you know, what am I afraid of? Am I afraid of failing? I've done that, you know? But God gave me the strength to get back up when I fall off. So then I try it this way and maybe I might not fall, maybe I might trip and stumble but before I fall, I catch myself and I'm running the independence for me.

Most of the mothers believed that education would be a path to independence. Pearl thought that education and retraining would help her be financially self-sufficient. She said,

I have some college but the skills I have are very old. I would need to be retrained and I made good money a long time ago. If I was retrained and get back up-to-date on my computer skills, I could go get another job. It might be entry level in the beginning because I don't have any recent work experience in that field but if I had the training, I could go on and do something else.

Likewise, Cassie stressed that education would lead her toward financial independence. She elaborated,

With education, you qualify for better jobs and you qualify for better pay. And you know, the more educated you are, the more money you can make. I've seen a lot of uneducated people make a lot of money. So it's like, you know, it was kind of like a lucky thing. But I mean I want to be sure that I'm going to be able to take care of myself financially, you know? That's what education means to me is financial stability.

Greta believed that education would be the best way to help welfare recipients get off the system. She said, "If you have a good education, you can get a good job and you won't have to be on welfare. I guess it all starts here. Maybe some self-esteem classes would help too."

In sum, the research participants took meanings of independence beyond ownerships of a nice house or reliable transportation. They viewed financial independence as a way to achieve psychological independence, meaning taking care of their children, a sense of stability, and equality in relationship. Furthermore, they believed that making decisions on their own and having confidence in themselves needed to be addressed in definitions of psychological independence. Education was viewed as a path to achieve independence.

Changes Could Be Made About Welfare in the Path of Independence

In striving for independence, the participants identified areas in relation to welfare they wished to modify. Access to education was identified as one of the areas that needed to be changed. As Greta noticed, there were jobs available; however, the women on welfare usually do not have the education to match job qualifications. Most of the mothers planned to go back to school or gain further training in order to make them more competitive in the job market. For example, Tilta thought that education was not only a tool for her to get off of welfare but also to lead her down a path toward opportunities. Likewise, Cassie believed that “you can’t make [your life] better unless you’re educated.” She specified assistance needed for single mothers who planned to pursue an education, such as housing and funds to compensate for not being able to take a full-time job. She suggested,

There should be something like if you’re in school, [or] like if you’re trying to better yourself, there should be something that will help, like the whole TANF process [benefits], or helping with or giving loans for students or maybe dorms for single mothers. ...Housing or you know, extra funds, because the single mother can only have time to have a part-time job. A single mother can’t have a full-time job and go to school full time and raise a family.

Because high tuition might be a barrier for poor single mothers who planned to pursue a higher education, Cassie further suggested giving scholarships to help with tuition and fees. She said,

Being a single mother, sometimes your credit is not that great and you’re not going to get the loan you need. They’ll lend you \$5000 but when you’re trying to go to school and it costs \$20,000, yeah, that just doesn’t match. There has to be something, something for single mothers who are trying to do something, yeah, a scholarship or help with tuition, you know, or grants helping with the cost of the first year of community college so that way a single mother can work part-time to save money to save for the next year.

Greta thought that housing and daycare should be a part of the education package. She suggested,

It's possible to go to work and school and take care of children but it's not humane. It's not. It's too much on people. It's not fair to the one parent and it's not fair to the kids. If there were places you could go to stay for periods of time with the standards of them saying, 'well, you have to stay in school full-time.' If there were places like that, there would be lot less welfare I think, places where women could go that were government funded, like this, but not a shelter. Somewhere that they provide the day care and they could go to school and come back and that's what I think. That would probably be a good solution.

The participants suggested that transportation and a good quality of daycare be a part of the job package. Pearl discussed the issue of transportation from her own experiences. She was not able to afford a car to get to work or to the work force for further training.

Additionally, there was no affordable transportation in the town where she used to live. She strongly suggested bus tokens to help single mothers with transportation issues. Likewise,

Faith identified transportation as one of the factors hindering her from getting a job.

Providing daycare would greatly help these single mothers with their job search. Pearl said,

They should offer you day care for a 30-day period in order to find a job. I'm not saying just give people free day care so that they can run around. Okay, I'll give them 18 job applications. I would probably give them more if I had day care for my kids. Offer me a 30-day period for me to find a job where I have somebody to take care of my kids where they're safe and well taken care of so that I can go out and look for work.

Faith expressed that the issue of daycare was a concern for her. She suggested, "Offer names or money for day care or something like that or help to get them [children] to school program. She [her daughter] can't just be by herself all of the time." Greta suggested establishing more facilities which provided live-in babysitters. She said, "You can't go to

school and you can't work and take care of children at the same time. It's just not possible for one person. It's just not. Open up more places which provide daycare."

Housing was another issue that most of the participants needed assistance with. Faith was struggling with the housing issue at the time of the interview. She was frustrated with her apartment search because her record of housing rental was ruined by her husband's inability to keep up the rent. Additionally, the minimum wage she earned did not help her pay rent. She thought a little more funding for housing would greatly help. She said,

Just something to help get on my feet a little more...and then start getting to the spot and get a little more money so they aren't able to cut you down. ...You might need a little more money to get on your feet.

Greta suggested that giving single mothers vouchers for deposits and application fees would make the housing search easier. She explained,

It's really difficult because just the light deposit is \$300. And you have to have electricity. But most don't have those funds because you can't afford to pay that. I just feel like if they could give vouchers to women who aren't so fortunate.

She was concerned that the corporations might not take vouchers, and further suggested that the government would have to have contracts with the electric companies or realties to take vouchers. In sum, all of the mothers in this study took welfare as a temporary back-up in the process of moving toward independence. As they pointed out, if daycare, housing, scholarships, and vouchers could be included in packages for jobs and education, it would speed up the process of achieving independence.

In this chapter, motherhood was not a choice for most research participants in the study. As a role of mother was added to their life journey, commitment in and responsibility for the children's best interests enabled them to stay strong in tough circumstances, and make

choices within an environment where there were not many resources. Although the mothers enjoyed mothering work, they acknowledged challenges such as discipline, meeting children's demanding needs, and being a solo parent for the children. Their ideas of good mother seemed similar to descriptions of one in general, such as being there for children and being a good role model. When discussing their perceptions of themselves as a mother, they thought they were good mothers but with some doubts in their minds. They expected their children to learn valuable lessons from their life experiences to be wise in their own journey. Education stood out for most research participants as a path toward a better life and a variety of possibilities. Relationship wise, they expected their children to learn respect toward themselves as well as others.

Coming from disruptive relationships, all research participants identified commitment, respect, and communication as essentials of marriage. Most notably, the mothers did not consider marriage until they were ready financially and psychologically. Rather, they were open to relationships. Financial and psychological readiness enabled them to gain power in relationships and led them toward independence. The mothers in the study viewed financial self-sufficiency as a building block of psychological independence (e.g., the sense of stability, independent care of the children, choice-making). The participants were aware of marriage promotion but believed that it would leave them in a dependency state from welfare to men.

The research participants differentiated using welfare as a means to survive in tough circumstances from being on welfare as a way of living. All of them expected to work but realized that they barely make a living on minimum wage and without benefits. Access to education was suggested to be improved in welfare policies. Additionally, the mothers

suggested that housing, grants for tuition and fees, childcare, and transportation should be included in education packages.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Perspectives of single mothers on welfare about in/dependence have been excluded from the dominant knowledge of poverty for a long time. This ethnographic study, informed by feminist standpoint theory, aimed to contribute to welfare research by providing an alternative discourse of independence from perspectives of single mothers on welfare that were generated from their experiences in mothering work and relationships/marriages, and with welfare policies. In this chapter, discussions of themes regarding motherhood, work, marriage/relationship, and welfare policies generated from the data will be presented and compared with previous research studies, and followed by explanations. Next, independence from the research participants' perspectives will be addressed. Last, implications for welfare policy as well as for the field of marriage and family therapy will be offered, and followed by limitations of this research study.

Independent Motherhood

Motherhood practice

The findings indicate that motherhood was not a choice for most of the research participants in this study. Most of them were pregnant with their first child in their teens by accident. But a choice they made under this circumstance was to be an involved mother for their children because of their own challenging childhood experiences. The core of their motherhood philosophy included a commitment to providing a better life for their children and maximizing the children's the best interests, which confirms the previous research that mothers want the best for their children (Little, 1999; Nelson, 2002). Clearly, children are the mothers' top priority. Additionally, being a good mother is important to the single mothers

on welfare (Schein, 1995; Scott et al., 2001; Seccombe, 1999). Interestingly, the research participants believed that they were good mothers yet had doubts in their mind from time to time. They described that their job as a mother was to provide for the children's needs, and viewed themselves as a good mother because their commitment in being there and providing a good care for their children (Little, 1999; Nelson, 2002). The possible explanation for their doubts about whether they are good mothers is that the mothers in this study were in a transition period in leaving abusive relationships; they had just started to build a new life for their children and provide for the family's needs on their own. However, difficulty with employment and apartment placements, which were viewed as a necessity to achieve these goals by the mothers, clouded their perceptions of themselves as a good mother. Another salient theme generated from the data was that although they acknowledged that the motherhood journey was not easy for them as a solo parent, they realized that they were the only one their children could rely on and recognized that the children were a major source of strength to keep them moving forward. The identity of mother enabled the single mothers to stay strong and independent in their journey of creating a new life (Blum & Deussen, 1996; Little, 1999; Nelson, 2002).

Work and Motherhood

The research participants in the study were greatly concerned about employment. Financially supporting the family is the other major responsibility in female-headed families (Berrick, 1995; Edin & Levin, 1996; Seccombe, 1999). The mothers in this study wanted to be employed not because of the work requirements but because of a commitment to raising their family on their own. As Seccombe (1999) argues, it seems common for mothers to work in female-headed families. Another possible reason for the research participants striving for

employment might be that they were influenced by a prevailing belief that paid work leads to independence, and can help maintain socio-personal dignity as a “productive citizen” (Porter, 2001) in the current society that credentials (e.g., job, education) and/or materials (e.g., location of house) are often used to evaluate one’s values. However, there were issues related to employment. As previous research studies (Blalock et al., 2004; Jencks & Swingle, 2000; Tweedie & Reichert, 1998) indicate, the single mothers who held jobs usually worked in the service sector with minimum wage and no benefits. The results of the current study indicate that the poor single mothers were concerned about the likelihood of not being able to make ends meet despite working full time at low-paying jobs, and were aware that work did not guarantee independence in the current economic structure (Blalock et al., 2004; Lee & Abrams, 2001; Little, 1999). However, the mothers in this study did not address the possible impact of work on mothering practice (e.g., time spent with their children). One reason could be that the mothers were anxious about their employment search, which they anticipated would help them afford a place to settle their new home before reaching the time limit of eligibility to stay in the shelter. Accordingly, work became a primary concern for them. As one mother in the study pointed out, types of job do not matter as long as there is a job for her. Yet, the issue of childcare was identified as a barrier to job search by the research participants. A lack of adequate childcare was a significant issue for the research participants (Blalock et al., 2004; Rogers-Dillon & Haney, 2005; Roy et al., 2004). A few mothers, who took their children with them to submit job application materials, said that they would not be surprised if they were not invited to on-site interviews.

Additionally, the research participants pointed out that job paying the minimum wage with no benefits was a barrier for them to move forward to independence in the current

economic structure. Although the Senate recently passed the Fair Minimum Wage Act of 2007 to raise the minimum wage from \$5.15 to 7.25 per hour to “allow millions of Americans a chance to provide a better life for themselves and their families,” it may require more effort than a raise of minimum wage to help low-income families create a better life, especially for female-head families. From my observations in the shelter, few research participants holding jobs at fast-food restaurants paid another mother to watch their children while working on evening or weekend shifts. Consistent with a study done by London et al. (2004), childcare is a major cost that detracts from the mothers’ material gains. Additionally, as many previous researchers (e.g., London et al., 2004; Schein, 1995) reported, working irregular hours reduces the time single mothers spend with their children. One research participant, who often had to work on weekends, told me after one interview that she realized the importance of work but worried about her teenage children, because her work schedule prevented her from spending more time with them. The findings suggest that women in female-headed families occupy at least two major roles, mother and wage worker. Needs of female-head families may differ from those of two-parent families. I doubt whether the raise in minimum wage would lead female-head families to a better life, because of a failure in acknowledging the need for child care in the larger economic structure. I suggest that the poverty issue needs to be viewed with gender and family structure lenses, in addition to the scope of economics.

Marriage and Marriage Promotion

Ideas of Marriage...But No Marriage until Standing on Own Feet

Most of the research participants experienced loss and distress coming from one or more than one disruptive relationship or marriage (Schein, 1995). Most of them met the

father of their children during their teenage years, and discovered that they were not suitable for a relationship because of the partners' actions, including violence, substance abuse, and/or a lack of commitment and responsibility. Children's well-being stood out as the main factor influencing the mothers' considerations of staying in or leaving the abusive relationship. The findings imply that the mothers' commitment and responsibility for their children's best interests plays a major role in their considerations of the relationship with their partner. The mothers endured unreasonable treatment from their partners in order to maintain a family for their children; however, they ultimately left their partner because of great concerns about the impact of their partner's destructive behaviors on their children's emotional and psychological well-being.

The research participants defined essentials of marriage drawing from their experiences in relationships or marriage. The mothers hoped for and had expectations of marriage (Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan, 2004). Characteristics of a future marital relationship, as described by the mothers, included equality, honesty, trust, respect, and commitment. The mothers took their future partners' willingness to hold a stable job as an important concern in their considerations of marriage. In addition, being loving and respectful stood out for the mothers as important characteristics they evaluated in future partners. The findings echo Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan's (2005) investigation about poor single mothers' concerns of marriage, including financial stability, a fear of failure in marriage, and quality of relationship (e.g., readiness for marriage).

The research participants did not take marriage as a feasible option for them, although they had a clear idea about marriage. They would not consider marriage until they were able to stand on their own feet (Edin, 2000). The findings, consistent with the previous research

(Gibson et al., 2005; Houston & Melz, 2004), indicate that they put marriage years off in order to achieve their goals, such as obtaining higher education or further training, holding stable employment with a livable wage and benefits, and building a better life for their children. In addition, they needed time to learn more about themselves in relationships from their past experiences before making a commitment to future marriage. Possible explanations for the mothers putting marriage on hold may be that they just left the abusive relationship with financial losses and emotional pain. Women who experience domestic violence, including physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse, often encounter multiple issues, such as depression, self-blaming, anxiety, helpless and low-self-esteem (Andrews & Brewin, 1990; Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992; Clements & Sawhney, 2000). Jumping into another marriage without giving enough time for recovery is likely to result in another failure, as one research participant in the study stated. In addition to emotional recovery, establishing a new life for the children was the mothers' top priority. Adding marriage into the picture may complicate the rhythm of new life-building.

The mothers in this study did not expect to move up on the social ladder through marriage. Yet, as Gibson, Edin, and McLanahan (2005) reported, the research participants would evaluate their financial as well as psychological readiness for marriage as considering commit themselves into another relationship. Furthermore, they were more concerned about the power differential between men and women in couple relationships rather than future partners' wealth. The mothers stressed that sharing power in decision making with partners was significant in marriage or relationships, although some of them held a cultural belief that men are the head of the household. One possible explanation for the mothers' emphasis on the power issue in relationships may be that coming from past relationships, in which male

partners as “a head of the house” abused their power through violence, control, and disrespect, enabled the mothers in the study to be more aware of power issues in couple relationships.

The results of this study individuate that the mothers want to marry after achieving their goals (Edin, 2000; Houston, & Melz, 2004; Lichter et al., 2004; Waller, 2001). While working on building a new life for themselves and their children, they remain open to romantic relationships, as Edin (2000) discovered. The mothers’ ideas of relationship have evolved over years that they had gone through all the suffering, disappointment, and hardship in past relationships. Commitment, respect, and friendship stand out as significant characteristics of relationship that they hope to have one day. The mothers took a slow pace with prolonged relationship involvement in order to learn more about potential men they were dating. This may be explained by assuming that the mothers do not want to invest themselves until they make sure that the men they are dating matches the characteristics of men they expect. According to this assumption, it implies that the mothers grant themselves more power to determine the direction of their relationships. In addition to prolonging relationship involvement, the research participants did not want the men they were or would be dating to be involved with their children out of a great concern for the children’s well-being, as Edin (2000) and Scott et al. (2001) reported in their studies. A few mothers in the study explicitly stressed that they did not want different men to be in and out of their children’s lives. In addition, they had clear ideas about how much they expected the men to be involved in parenting with their children. These findings suggest that motherhood is still salient in the picture of romance-relationship involvement. For single mothers, the picture of marriage goes beyond two persons involved in the relationship. Protection of children’s well-

being is the main concern as the mothers consider relationships. It may be concluded that as a role of mother is taken as a primary identity, ideal portrayals of marriage are developed with children's well-being at the center.

Pro-marriage Promotes Dependency

The research participants strongly questioned marriage promotion. Although previous research studies (Fitchen, 1995; Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2000) indicate contradictory findings regarding whether marriage secures or increases single mothers' financial well-being, the mothers in this study strongly believed that marriage is not a solution for poverty. Further, they pointed out that marriage promotion, in effect, still leaves them in a dependency state that shifts from welfare to men, which lends support to Mink's (2001) theoretical perspective. The research participants objected to marriage promotion because of a belief that marriage should be a personal choice. The emphasis on choice may be explained by assuming that most of the research participants used to be married by common-law rather than by choice. As the federal government strongly advocates marriage promotion to single mothers on welfare, it is likely that they might feel their choice of marriage is not respected again. In addition, the mothers in this study made a choice to pursue being independent to raise their children and build a new life for themselves and their children. Marriage would not be on their priority until they achieved their goals. Last, as the research participants were concerned, pro-marriage promotes incentives to men rather than women. One possible explanation about the mothers' concern may be that they learned from their experiences with their male partners about advantages that men might gain over women's sacrifices in traditional marriage. For instance, one research participant experienced extreme difficulty with the apartment search because of her negative credit reports caused by

her husband using her name to rent a house and open accounts for utilities but failed to keep up the bills. She repaid debts while building a new home and independently taking care of her children.

These findings imply that poor single mothers' determination to pursue independence is disregarded in marriage promotion. Moreover, marriage promotion seems to imply that formation of family should be based on marriage, and furthermore, that two-parent family structure is the norm. Given the fact that the society has been more diverse, "family" has taken multiple forms in addition to traditional two-parent head families (Giele, 1997; Leira, 1999). For instance, some women make a family with biological and/or adopted children and no male partner by choice. Children's well-being is well-maintained through single mothers' creative efforts to network and share resources as well as through a commitment to achieve self-sufficiency (Hertz & Ferguson, 1997). The federal government's hold to a traditional concept of two-parent family based on marriage rather than acknowledge a variety of family structures may fail to provide proper services to alternative formations of family with different needs.

From Margin to Center: Constructions of Independence

Contrary to the prevailing discourse of welfare dependency which declares welfare recipients as abusers of welfare system, the research participants viewed welfare benefits as one resource on a path of independence after they left an abusive relationship. They appreciated that welfare provides necessities, such as Medicaid and cash assistance, for themselves and their children in a transitional period, and explicitly expressed that they used welfare as a back-up rather than permanently living on welfare. One possible explanation about the mothers choosing the words "using welfare" rather than being on welfare is to

distinguish themselves from prevailing descriptions of welfare recipients, such as taking advantage of the welfare system. In addition, the idea of “using welfare” gives poor single mothers more power in the sense that they have flexibility to utilize or discard welfare. However, this construction of welfare use still seemed to fade into the power of the dominant discourse, which strongly influences their feelings and perceptions about welfare. The mothers in this study acknowledged their feelings of ambivalence toward the use of welfare; this may be explained by Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma. He suggests that stigma constitutes discrepancy between one’s virtual social identity, meaning that attributes that others may view the individual mainly relying on certain assumptions and stereotypes, and actual social identity referring to attributes one can be shown to possess. In the case of welfare, virtual social identity of poor single mothers is described lazy, free rider of taxpayers, and abuser of the welfare system; whereas the actual social identity of the mothers in this study is committed, hard-working, responsible, and motivated. Their feelings of ambivalence toward welfare as a symbol of stigma are caused by the discrepancy between the mothers’ virtual and social identities. They use welfare as one resource to achieve independence; however, this actual social identity becomes invisible because of the virtual social identity imposed on the mothers. Accordingly, single mothers’ efforts, desire, and motivation to be independent are often discredited by the discourse about welfare.

Feminists (Fraser & Gordon, 1994; Kittay, 1999; Mink, 1998) criticized the notion of independence with a strong value on economic self-sufficiency upheld by the welfare reform of 1996 as androcentric and patriarchal, mainly because the work-first policy does not value care-giving work nor the responsibilities associated with the role of mother in female-headed families. Feminists further suggest that childcare work the single mothers provide to their

dependent children should be seen as legitimate work and deserving of welfare support (Kittay, 1998, 1999; Michel, 1998; Mink, 1998; Porter, 2001). Little (1999), in her study about single mothers on welfare, reported that the role of mother enabled them to resist dependency, and that the mothers viewed themselves as independent because they were the head of the household. The mothers thought of themselves independent because they did not rely on men (Blum & Deussen, 1996; Little, 1999; Nelson, 2002). Moreover, constructions of independence by them were generated from their multiple roles, such as mother, worker/provider and relationship partner in their daily lives. The research participants construed independence along two dimensions—financial and psychological. The single mothers acknowledged the importance of financial self-sufficiency and strongly pursued it. They anticipated being able to provide a better life for their children and gain more power in relationships with their male partners through financial independence.

Although it seems that the research participants subscribed to American cultural standards of living to define financial independence as ownership of house and car, working a livable wage job, and saving for their children's college fund, it is worth noting that the mothers took financial self-sufficiency as a path to achieve psychological independence. Psychological independence was construed as a sense of stability, including both financial and emotional stability, ability to independently take care of children, confidence to create a family as they desire, a sense of power in relationship/marriage, and ability to make choices on their own. Different from the American cultural belief of independence that focuses on individuals' capacity to care and be responsible for self without relying on others (Porter, 2001), the construction of independence by the research participants in the study seems to focus on their power of being in charge in their life. Financial self-sufficiency is taken as a

means to achieve independence. This may be explained by an assumption that the mothers were in a position of socially expected dependency in past relationships, which they possess less power to make decisions with work, marriage, and money arrangements. Moreover, in the relationship that the mothers had to rely on their male partner for financial support, it can be understood that the mothers acknowledged financial self-sufficiency as a base to achieve the independence they desired.

I would argue that the current welfare policy might still leave mothers experiencing domestic violence at risk for further harm. A few mothers in the study described that they were confined to the situation, and did not have external resources and support to leave the abusive relationship. Additionally, in many cases of domestic violence, women are socially isolated purposely by their abusive partners (Hydén, 2005). Besides welfare that may be the only resource for women leaving abusive relationships, searching for job that they anticipate to independently supporting their children is on top priority after leaving their partner. However, most of the research participants experienced challenges with their employment search, such as a lack of adequate training or education, and issues of childcare and transportation. Under the circumstance in which mothers who cannot find a job to support themselves and their children, it is likely that they would return to the abusive relationship because of economic needs (Griffing, Ragin, Morrison, Sage, Madry, & Primm, 2005). In addition, according to Raphael (1996, 1999), the abusive partners often interfere with the women's paid work, and thus make it difficult for the women to work consistently. Moore and Selkove (1999) found that more than half of the battered women were afraid of going to work or school because of their partner's threats. Battered mothers are still exposed to great

dangers if special considerations for female welfare recipients with domestic violence experiences are not taken into account in welfare policies.

In addition to childcare difficulties, barriers the research participants identified that hindered their progress toward independence included transportation and education. Roy et al. (2004) found in their study that welfare recipients who are not able to afford a car heavily relied on public transportation. However, the shelter the research participants in the current study stayed at locates in a town which public transportation does not reach. The employment search was confined to an area that the mothers could walk to (Blalock, Tiller, & Monroe, 2004). It is not surprising that some of the research participants considered the possibility of moving to a big city in which there were public transportation services and more job resources.

Education was seen by the participants as a path toward independence, as others researchers (Butler et al., 2004; Christopher, 2005; Coffield, 2002; Deprez & Butler, 2001; Dill, 1998; Jennings, 2002; Scarbrough, 2001) discovered in their studies. From their experiences with employment searches, most of the mothers were aware that the high school diploma or GED did not help them move very far toward financial self-sufficiency. The mothers in this study strongly believed that higher education, referring to college degrees, would lead them to employment with better pay and benefits, and then the achievement of the so-called “American Dream,” meaning ownership of a house, taking care of their children, and the ability to provide the children with a college education. Accordingly, access to education was strongly suggested by the research participants to take the place of marriage promotion, with a belief that they would be able to be independent if they had a college degree. Although the research participants believed that education would lead them to

higher-paying job with benefits, and then to the achievement of independence, I would argue that other factors need to be considered from a structural perspective, including the needs and trends of the job market, and the overall economic climate. Placing independence on the individual's level may result in neglecting structural issues and then blaming individuals for not being responsible for self-sufficiency.

Implications

Implications for Welfare Policy

Although the research participants in this study expressed their need for a college education, welfare reform restricts access to higher education (Coffield, 2002). The federal government in the TANF Interim Final Rule of 2006 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006) explicitly stated that the TANF is not a college scholarship program for welfare recipients who desire to pursue a postsecondary education. Instead, welfare recipients are encouraged to participate in vocational education programs that are directly related to preparation for occupations but cannot exceed 12 months under the work-first approach policy. However, the research participants in the current study acknowledged that they were not able to find a job that would lead them toward independence with a limited education. In addition, as previous studies indicate (Blalock et al., 2004; Lee & Abrams, 2001; Little, 1999), paid work with minimum wage does not guarantee self-sufficiency. Although vocational trainings are provided to welfare recipients, I would argue it is likely that they still struggle with making ends meet on minimum wage, if job-skill training does not match the current and future needs and trends of the labor market.

Although the federal government claims that TANF has been remarkably successful because millions of women left welfare for work (U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services, 2006), many researchers (Hennessy, 2005; Lichter & Jayakody, 2002; Medley et al., 2005) reported that most of the former welfare recipients still struggled with stable employment and remained poor after removing off the welfare rolls, and strongly questioned whether success in reducing the welfare rolls can be seen as an indicator of achievement of independence. As the welfare reform of 1996 strongly upholds one single value—work—and the role of wage worker, I argue that the emphasis on work in welfare reform fails to address responsibilities and issues associated with roles of mother and relationship partner that the research participants valued as well. I suggest that the vision of welfare policy be broadened from work to career. My idea of the career approach was informed by Schneider's (2000) study about career and education paths for welfare recipients. However, "career" in her study mainly focused on work. Informed by feminist work (Bloom & Kilgore, 2003; Kitty, 1998, 1999; Michel, 1998; Mink, 1998, 2001; Porter, 2001), I would expand the career approach by adding responsibilities associated with roles of mother and relationship partner, in addition to worker. Career refers to the development of short-term and long-term plans and outlooks. It includes not only jobs and vocational training, but also education, relationship, and parenthood planning. One's goals and needs may vary depending on his/her stage of life. Unexpected events may occur and then change one's life path. Career-oriented welfare, as I am suggesting it, is based on welfare recipients' strengths and family's needs, and involves planning and organization of resources to yield different possibilities for the family. Welfare is tailored to meet their needs, and provides necessary resources to help them implement their plans. Adequate childcare, transportation, and housing that often concern welfare recipients would be included into different tracks, such as education and job-capability enhancement. Each family may request different tracks depending on the needs and development of the

family at different times. For instance, the education track may be offered to poor single mothers who desire to pursue a postsecondary education, or those who consider changing their job path. Consultations regarding parenting and relationship/marriage are provided to welfare recipients to strengthen their family relationships.

The career-oriented welfare policy takes a more holistic view that includes responsibilities associated multiple roles that poor single mothers carry. Moreover, it changes the dynamic between welfare recipients and welfare-service providers. This approach requires welfare recipients to be involved in planning to achieve the best interests for their family; whereas the welfare-service providers take a role of consultant as well as resource organizer and provider. In other words, the welfare-service provider develops a partnership with welfare recipients rather than a “master” or “authority” to show welfare recipients what is the best for them. Furthermore, it would help welfare recipients to achieve independence by giving power to them to take charge of their lives.

Implications for Marriage and Family Therapy

The Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) has required marriage and family therapy programs to address issues of gender, ethnicity, culture, and social class in curricula. Marriage and family therapists have been increasingly aware of the influences of gender, ethnicity, culture, and social class issues on family relationships and interactions in daily life. These issues have been acknowledged and addressed in clinical practice, training, and supervision in the past decade. However, as Walker (1988) points out, the field tends to focus on development of skills, techniques, and interventions aimed to improve family function in therapy rather than overtly acknowledge the impact of welfare policy on families that therapists work with. Yet, from a systemic

perspective, under the current welfare policy with a strong focus on employment, poor single mothers often juggle work and mothering, and may not be able to attend to some of their children's needs. For instance, single mothers, who work double shifts, may not be able to supervise their children's homework at nights, or may be too exhausted to attend their children's needs. These mothers are often labeled as "unfit" or "irresponsible." Therapists who fail to acknowledge the constraints of welfare policy on mothering practices may blame mothers for not being responsible for their children. It is important for marriage and family therapists to acknowledge multiple roles in context, such as wage worker, mother, provider, student, and/or relationship partner that poor single mothers may carry, and recognize how they organize and complete responsibilities associated with these roles each day.

Gergen (1999) argues that discourses can be seen as a powerful narrative of reality that individuals use to make sense of the world surrounded them. In other words, discourses are analogically taken as a "map" to guide one's understanding about unfamiliar events and population. Inevitably, therapists are likely to be influenced by the dominant discourses about welfare dependency, and understand them through certain discourses when working with clients who are single mothers on welfare. However, Bateson (1979) points out, "the map is not the territory, and the name is not the thing named" (p. 30). This gives therapists an opportunity to reflect how the map (e.g., the discourse of welfare dependency) affects directions of conversation between therapists and clients, and what might be missed as traveling along the map. Therapists' assumptions and biases informed by dominant discourses often color their perceptions of clients in therapy (White & Epston, 1990). Failure to examine therapists' assumptions may result in a practice of social injustice. For instance, therapists influenced by the responsible fatherhood initiative may disregard wishes of single

mothers' wishes to build a new life and independently take care of their children, and as a result attempt to convince the single mothers to build co-parenting relationships with their partners. This may result in putting a label of resistance on the mothers. Accordingly, therapists need to be more aware of who develops the discourse, how it is constructed, and how it shapes family relationships as well as the therapeutic alliance. Furthermore, therapists may recognize clients' strengths through discussions of their resistance to dependency discourse and welfare policy, and leave room for clients to create alternative discourses, which may help the clients open new visions about independence, motherhood, and relationships/marriage based on their daily struggles and experiences.

Anderson (2006) points out that all understanding is through one's interpretations. Individuals' interpretations are largely influenced by cultures and contexts, including generational, gendered, ethnic, and social class contexts. Comments, suggestions, interventions, and exploring questions that therapists offer to clients often reflect therapists' cultural beliefs and values. Therapists' self-study of his/her social locations (e.g., gender, marital status, ethnic background, professional identity) and cultural privileges and disadvantages associated with each location may be the first step to gain more understanding about themselves as a therapist as well as person (Plummer, 1995). This exploration may be taken further by examining how perspectives of social locations affect their interventions, conversation direction, and suggestions. Therapists may not be able to fully understand experiences of single mothers on welfare because their experiences and privileges of social locations differ from their clients' experiences. However, opening conversations with clients about experiences with social class and class privileges in therapy with poor single mothers on welfare may enhance relationships with and understanding about the clients.

Power is granted to the position of therapist. Knowing that they have this power, marriage and family therapy researchers and practitioners may encourage different voices of single mothers on welfare, and develop alternative discourses with them by examining values upheld by welfare policies, and questioning mainstream assumptions of in/dependency. Metaphors that Marriage and Family Therapists use to understand families have been broadened from within a machine-like family system to families in larger cultural systems (McGoldrick, 1998; Zimmerman & Haddock, 2001). In line with this shift, therapists' commitment to promote social justice needs to expand from inside the therapy room to the community and society at large (Thomas, 2003).

Limitations of the Study

With the nature of qualitative research and the small sample size recruited from one particular region, the research findings can neither provide a test to any of poverty theories nor be generalized to a larger population. Additionally, I am aware of biases and assumptions I hold of independence that welfare policy upholds, and made these assumptions explicit in a previous chapter. Peer discussions and debriefings were conducted as the research progressed, and enabled me to gain realizations about how I approached the research participants, how my questions informed by my assumptions shaped responses of the research participants, and where I stood at each stage of the project. However, a lack of a thorough member check is one limitation of this study. Because of the nature of the shelter, in which women experiencing domestic violence could come and go within a few days or weeks without leaving further contact information, I was not able to invite the research participants to go over the summaries of interviews, or interpret them with me after all interviews were completed. Instead, I verbally reported brief summaries of the preceding

interview to some of the research participants, and double checked with them if there were misunderstandings or misrepresentations. When moving along from data collection, analysis, and report writing, I was surprised by how precisely the research participants articulated ideas of independence from their daily experiences. In addition, their strong stance toward marriage promotion went beyond my expectations.

Another limitation of the study is that this inquiry primarily focused on single mothers on welfare, who just emerged from abusive relationships. Their ideas of independence, the power issue in intimate relationships, and marriage promotion may be different from single mothers' who have not experienced domestic violence. The findings are not able to generalize to the population of female welfare recipients. Last, this study only focused on perspectives of single mothers on welfare. For future research studies, it may be more holistic to include perspectives of welfare case workers, vocational trainers, social workers at shelters, and/or staff and volunteers providing services for welfare recipients in community agencies about ideas of independence.

Conclusion

In closing, values of work toward independence the welfare reform of 1996 explicitly upholds pose a problem for single mothers on welfare in that it leaves welfare recipients in an epistemological dilemma. They acknowledge the role of wage work as part of motherhood, and strive for financial self-sufficiency to create a better life for their family. However, overemphasis on financial independence fails to recognize the roles of mother and relationship partner, and further constrains discourses of independence poor single mothers generated from their motherhood and relationship/marriage experiences. The federal government taking a "master" role with welfare recipients often further marginalizes voices

of single mothers on welfare. Moreover, dominant discourses that do not incorporate welfare recipients' perspectives about success in helping welfare recipients leave welfare for employment and moving toward independence are incomplete. Inadequate welfare policies that fail to address issues of gender and family structure may create more struggles for single mothers on welfare. Policy makers and professional service providers (e.g., case workers, marriage and family therapists, social workers) may take the role of learner with the single mothers as experts at living with welfare policy in order to serve the needs of single mothers on welfare.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVED DOCUMENTS



Institutional Review Board
 Office of Research Compliance
 Vice President for Research
 1138 Pearson Hall
 Ames, Iowa 50011-7207
 515-281-4100
 FAX 515-281-4257

TO: Wan-Juo Cheng

FROM: Human Subject Research Compliance Office

PROJECT TITLE: Reauthorizations of Independence: Voices of Single Mothers on Welfare
 RE: IRB ID No.: 05-322

APPROVAL DATE: July 12, 2005 REVIEW DATE: July 8, 2005

LENGTH OF APPROVAL: One year CONTINUING REVIEW DATE: July 11, 2006

TYPE OF APPLICATION: ☐ New Project ☒ Continuing Review

Your human subjects research project application, as indicated above, has been approved by the Iowa State University IRB #1 for recruitment of subjects not to exceed the number indicated on the application form. All research for this study must be conducted according to the proposal that was approved by the IRB. If written informed consent is required, the IRB-stamped and dated Informed Consent Document(s), approved by the IRB for this project only are attached. Please make copies from the attached "masters" for subjects to sign upon agreeing to participate. The original signed Informed Consent Document should be placed in your study files. A copy of the Informed Consent Document should be given to the subject.

The IRB must conduct **continuing review** of research at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk, but not less than once per year. Renewal is the PI's responsibility, but as a reminder, you will receive notices at least 60 days and 30 days prior to the next review. **Please note the continuing review date for your study.**

Any **modification** of this research project must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval, prior to implementation. Modifications include but are not limited to: changing the protocol or study procedures, changing investigators or sponsors (funding sources), including additional key personnel, changing the Informed Consent Document, an increase in the total number of subjects anticipated, or adding new materials (e.g., letters, advertisements, questionnaires). Any future correspondence should include the IRB identification number provided and the study title.

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) **all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.

Your research records may be audited at any time during or after the implementation of your study. Federal and University policy require that all research records be maintained for a period of three (3) years following the close of the research protocol. If the principal investigator terminates association with the University before that time, the signed informed consent documents should be given to the Departmental Executive Officer to be maintained.

Research investigators are expected to comply with the University's Federal Wide Assurance, the Belmont Report, 45 CFR 46 and other applicable regulations prior to conducting the research. These documents are on the Human Subjects Research Office website or are available by calling (515) 294-4566.

Upon completion of the project, a Project Closure Form will need to be submitted to the Human Subjects Research Office to officially close the project.

C: HDFS
Megan Murphy

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research Assurances
Vice Provost for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
515 294-4566
FAX 515 294-4267

DATE: June 9, 2006
TO: Wan-Juo Cheng
CC: Professor Megan Murphy
FROM: Institutional Review Board
Office of Research Assurances
SUBJECT: IRB ID Number: 05-322

Approval Date: June 9, 2006 **Date for Continuing Review:** June 8, 2007

The Chair of the Institutional Review Board Chair of Iowa State University has conducted the annual continuing review of the protocol entitled: "Reauthorizations of Independence: Voices of Single Mothers on Welfare about Motherhood, Marriage, and Welfare Policies." Your study has been approved for a period of one year. The continuing review date for this study is no later than June 8, 2007.

Just as a reminder, the federal regulations require continuing review of ongoing projects. Please submit the form with sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study, prior to the continuing review date. Failure to complete and submit the continuing review form will result in expiration of IRB approval on the continuing review date and the file will be administratively closed. A new application for IRB approval may be required to reactivate the study. In addition, all research related activities involving the participants **must stop** on the continuing review date, until approval can be re-established, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard to research participants. As a courtesy to you, we will send a reminder of the approaching review date approximately one month prior to this date.

Any **changes in the protocol or consent form** should not be implemented without prior IRB review and approval, using the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form. These documents are located on the Office of Research Assurances website or available by calling (515) 294-4566, www.compliance.iastate.edu.

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) **all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office of Research Assurances, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

APPENDIX B

EXAMPLE OF NARRATIVE

Cassie—White, 24 year-old single mother

Relationship with her ex-husband

Cassie had been at the shelter about a week when I met her for the research interview. She divorced her husband about a year ago because of his abusive behaviors toward her. She and her ex-husband had two children together, Kelly, three and a half years old, and Kyle, two years old. At the time of the interview, her ex-husband already remarried and Kelly stayed with him and his new family. Cassie took Kyle and temporarily stayed at the shelter.

Cassie and her ex-husband got married at age of 20. Their marriage lasted about four years. In Cassie's description of her ex-husband, "he is a really really good Dad but a terrible husband." She added, "He's great to our kids, great. He doesn't have a whole lot to do with Kyle, but you know, he's there to support them financially. If you need something, he's there. He takes care of everything. The bills are paid. But he doesn't spend a lot of time with him." He was a "good" father in the sense that he financially provided what his children needed. But he was a terrible husband for Cassie. She elaborated,

"The abuse started right before I got pregnant with my daughter and then it stopped. [After that] it was emotional and verbal abuses when I was pregnant and then it got physical again after when she was 5 months old. It got really bad. We broke up and got back together. He went to San Antonio and he came for visits so that he could see our daughter. And then I got pregnant with our son so he came back home and it was just really weird and really emotional abuse, a lot of emotional abuse, you know, he just didn't want to really be there."

Cassie realized that he had a certain lifestyle he would like to live up to. She said,

"He liked to go out and he liked to party and he liked to drink and hang out with his friend and that kind of stuff. He wanted to be young and single. When you're 23 or 24 years old you want to be young and single you know, that's what he wanted and he would stay out and it was bad. Yeah, even after Kyle was born, he waited after my c-section and then it [abusive behaviors] started again."

She went on to say,

"He was just going through spurts just here and there spurts where our fighting would get so bad that it got abusive and um, I don't know, we just decided that it was too much for either one of us. We had grown up together and we had grown up to be two totally different people. We wanted two totally different things so we decided that it wasn't right for us to be together but he would still argue. He would say that he doesn't care for her so we'll still argue and he's still show up all mad and scare me and we get into heated arguments and he'll push me or, you know."

Cassie acknowledged the gap between her and her ex-husband could not be filled up. But in her eyes, he was a good person. If she needed help with car payments, he paid it for her.

Cassie explained she did not leave her ex-husband when he beat her at the first time, and hoped her children would understand why she divorced their father.

“We have to work it out and if it turns out bad then ok but I want my kids to know that at least we tried, you know. It was none of their fault. They had nothing to do with it. They were young when we separated. It was just that we grew up to be two different people with different views and we accept that with each other and we move on.”

Experiences on welfare

Cassie planed to leave the shelter as soon as possible. She already found a transitional housing program for her and Kyle to stay. The program not only reduced 70% of the rent for tenants who were on TANF, but also provided scholarship to help with school or college tuitions. Most importantly, Cassie thought, “It was a secure environment so I don’t have to worry about him showing up. And, they will be able to help me fight to get my daughter back. And, they have free daycare. It is a really good long-term housing program.”

Cassie grew up on welfare for a few years. She didn’t think that her mother depended on welfare. Her step-father worked a lot but did not make enough to meet the family’s needs. In Cassie’s point of view, her mother struggled with taking care of her children and welfare really helped with it. She observed how her mother felt using welfare.

“She was really embarrassed when she used it, just like how I am. She seemed embarrassed but she never really seemed to work towards another goal. It was like, ok this is my life, I’m embarrassed but this it my life, you know? She worked at Christmas time and stuff like that which you know, she was more, my brothers had a lot of issues and she needed to attend to them a lot. She couldn’t really work a lot. She was ok, she was sedentary. She was ok with her life, and she was ok with how everything was. But I’m not ok with my life right now.”

Cassie noticed that her mother was embarrassed on welfare but seemed to be confined into the tough living circumstance, which made her accept what she could have. But Cassie pointed out she did not want to pick up her mother’s living philosophy of living., although she struggled with taking care of her children and family as her mother used to do. She stated, “I grew up on welfare and I didn’t want to do that, I didn’t want to be that, I didn’t want to be my mom to my kids.”

I was curious about how she felt using welfare. She admitted that she felt embarrassed as well. She further shared with me,

“It opens my eyes, when I have to swipe that card, it’s like swiping a bank card, you know what I mean. It reminds me every time that I’m not doing something right. I need to keep moving, you know. I need to work on my goals a bit harder, you know?”

She further elaborated that wiping the welfare card sent her messages that “I’m not educated enough. And, I’m not making enough money.” She took welfare as a reminder as well as a motive in the sense that “it reminds me that it [welfare] isn’t permanent, this isn’t my future and isn’t going to be my whole live. It motivates me to keep looking forward.” Analogically, she viewed welfare as a **“kick me in the butt and I’ll go” rather than “a crutch.”** She further elaborated,

“Some people just live off of it, and they’re ok with it. And that’s ok if that’s what they want to do. That’s fine. But I don’t want to live off welfare, I want more. I want to be independent and I want to take care of myself and I want to show my kids that they can take care of themselves.”

I was curious what she defined independence. She explained,

“To be on my own, taking care of my kids, helping them, being able to help them when they’re older and when they’re my age and they’re in this situation. I want to be able to help them so that they don’t have to depend on anyone else but me. Taking care of yourself and not having to depend on others, not having to ask for help, you know. I don’t mean to ask for help, I understand that but you know, I want to be the one that my kids turn to.”

For Cassie, the meaning of independence centered on taking care of her children on her own. She wanted to be the one her children could rely on. She further narrowed down on education and job that would help her achieve her definition of independence.

“With education, you qualify for better jobs and you qualify for better pay. And you know, the more educated you are, the more money you can make. I’ve seen a lot of uneducated people make a lot of money so it’s like, you know, it was kind of like a lucky thing but I mean, I want to be sure that I’m going to be able to take care of myself financially, you know? That’s what education means to me is financial stability.”

Another issue worth attention was the notion of **receiving help**. Cassie elaborated,

“It’s hard for me. It’s really hard. I’m really prideful. I’m used to trying to just go and do my own thing like when I was married and we weren’t on welfare, he made really good money and I thought that I would never have to look back at the days. I forgot about being a child on welfare and I looked down on people when I had money and I don’t have money anymore and I don’t want my kids to ever ever see people as I did a year and a half ago. That’s why I don’t ever want him to forget that we were here.”

She repeatedly expressed how awkward she felt receiving help to raise her family. Receiving welfare meant to her that “I don’t feel independent. I don’t feel like I’m taking care of myself.” Coming from a collectivist culture, I viewed receiving help as a part of give-and-take relationship in the sense that individuals receiving help from others or community would pass their assistance onto those who need help when they are able. In other word, receiving help was not a shame. With the preoccupied idea, I approached this topic from a cultural perspective. Cassie explained to me about the American perception of receiving help, “you can’t do it on your own, go do it by yourself, go get a job and you know suck it up. That’s the American way.”

What I found interesting was that she would see herself coming back and donating time for those who experienced similar struggles, and motivate them through sharing her story. She

said, “I think, yeah, it’ll all come back. You can get help but you should pass it on and you should help someone else. That’s how I was raised and that’s how and that’s what I want to do.”

Cassie remembered her childhood experiences on welfare. She did not want her children to forget their experiences on welfare. Furthermore, **she hoped that her children would learn from the experiences on welfare.**

“I don’t ever want them to forget where they come from. I don’t want them to ever look down someone. I want them to always be willing to help. I want them to know that my mom struggled, my mom worked her butt off, you know, my mom didn’t have an education until she was 25 years old, you know but she still took care of us and she still loves us and look at her now. I want my kids to know. You know? Yeah. I want my kids to know everything that they’ve gone through, you know? It’s for them and I want them to know that it’s ok, you can fall down and you can get picked back up.”
She concluded that she fell down and then used welfare to “pick myself up.”

Minimum wage and American dream

Cassie planed to go back to college and wanted to be a teacher in future. She would like to work part time while working on a degree in Education and taking care of her children. Eventually, she wanted to be able to own a house, take care of herself and her children or her grandchildren, and send her children to college by herself. She said, “it is just the American Dream.”

Cassie used to work in the human resource department at Wal-Mart about eight months and Home Depot for a year and a half. At the time of the interview, Cassie had a job offered at a grocery store as a cashier. She would be paid about 7 dollars an hour without a health insurance.

“But I just found out what it’s like last week and I’m like, oh my god, yeah, I have to take this job and I can’t work. I thought that minimum wage was at like \$6. I don’t see how I’m going to do this. I just can’t do it. Compared to some of the ladies that are here, I’ve made a lot of money, compared to them, you know.”
She went on,

“You can’t be independent if you don’t have insurance. How are you going to get your kids to the doctor but you can’t pay for insurance and getting paid \$5 an hour? I don’t understand how the government, how Americans want everyone to all this stuff [self-sufficiency] but at the same time, still pay them \$5 an hour. It’s much better for everyone to be independent and to have their own car and a cheap house. That’s part of our lifestyle. If you’re supposed to do that on \$5 an hour being a single mother, with 2 kids, it’s not going to happen. It’s outrageous.”

She did not believe that single mothers on welfare would reach the standard lifestyle, called as American Dream, with a minimum wage. But she said, “We want that [American Dream]. We want that. But its kind of like, let me see, it’s hard, we strive for it and at the same time

we know that it is out of our hands, we're not going to reach that." It was frustrating. I was wondering if there was an alternative of American Dream for single mothers on welfare. She described an alternative American Dream that worked for her.

"For a single mother, just being able to take care of her kids, just being able to work just the 40 hours a week and being able to go home and spend time with her kids, and you know, not have to worry that they're not living up to the standards, just being able to make it and not have to worry about what other people think of them."

She added,

"Even the people that live with, you know, the American Dream, 70% of them are so far in debt. I mean it's just a big front, it's a mess, you know. It's not real because the living like that may be even worse off than I am, you know?"

From Cassie's perspective, working hard, being able to take care of her children, and living up to her standard were spirits of American Dream. Adding another element, independence, into the picture of American Dream, she made it more holistic.

"My opinion of that is being able to take care of myself, and also at the same time living up to my standard of living and at the same time being able to come back and help someone else. That's what it is, when I'll be able to take care of my kids and also help someone else."

Cassie further stressed importance of emotional independence in her picture of American Dream.

"Being able to understand other people and being able to say that this is what I want, this is what I like, this is what I don't like, or don't want and be ok with it and not feel like you have to please everyone. Being in charge of yourself and not having to worry, you know, just staying a strong person."

How welfare could have helped achieve her idea of American Dream

For Cassie to start out to achieve her idea of American Dream, she believed that education was means, "I mean if people need help and they want to try and make their family better, you can't make it better unless you're educated, so it's all just a big circle." She specified certain assistance that were needed, such housing and scholarship for education.

"There should be something like, if you're in school like if you're trying to better yourself, there should be something that will help, like the whole TANIF process maybe, or helping with or giving loans for students or maybe dorms for single mothers. ... Housing or you know, extra funds, because the single mother can only have time to have a part-time job. A single mother can't have a full-time job and go to school full time and raise a family. I think that there needs to be something, you know."

For single mothers who planned to pursue education, Cassie thought scholarship or grants would help.

"Being a single mother, sometimes your credit is not that great and you're not going to get the loan you need. They'll lend you \$5000 but when you're trying to go to school and it costs 20,000, yeah, that just doesn't match. There has to be something, something for single mothers who are trying to do something, yeah, a scholarship or help with tuition, you know or grant. Even helping with

the cost of the first year of community college so that way a single mother can work part-time to save money to save for the next year, you know.”

Ideas of marriage

When Cassie married her ex-husband, she thought he was the one she would stay with in the rest of her life with a belief, “Marriage is sacred.” She elaborated, “I know that you are supposed to be with that person. There’s a bond there that can’t be broken. It shouldn’t be broken between us too but it’s just not and it’s really weird.”

Cassie did want to have types of relationships her mother had with her biological father and step-father. Cassie’s mother was physically abused by her biological father. Her mother left him because her concern about Cassie witnessing how she was treated by her father. She did not want Cassie to think that it was okay for a man to hit a woman. Although her step-father did not lay his finger on her mother, he had a drinking problem.

Cassie did not consider remarriage anytime soon. But she would welcome relationships. She shared with me about few guys she dated. She was aware that she was attracted to helpers, such as firefighters, and policemen. One guy she was dating at the time of the interview was a policeman. He was eight years older than she was. Although she described he was a very nice person, she did not take this relationship seriously. She did not introduce him to her two children, because she “did not want them to see mommy holding hands with someone or getting close to someone, and then it’s not working out and it’s over and then the guy is gone.” She stressed what she wanted for herself and her children was stability. But she did find that she liked to date older men, because “they’ve been around a little bit longer to know themselves and what they want and be ready for what they want.”

Cassie had certain criteria for future partners, including taking her children out and spending time with them. She wanted “a guy that wants to be a father.” Unlike her step-father who “was in the background and emotionally detached,” she did want her future partner to actively involve in her children’s lives, including disciplining her children. It came from her idea of family. She believed, “A family is everyone is united. And, everyone has a say in how they feel everyone should treat each other.” Accordingly, she expected him to be there. She said, “I’d like him to not worry about what he is going to do about it, how he is going to ask about it. What is he going to do if I’m not around to intervene.” She also would help her children commit to him as well. It seemed that Cassie would grant her future partner privileges as a parent. In other words, she not only expected him as a partner for herself, but also as a parent for her children. But she wanted to make sure that her future partner shared same views on discipline, such as no spanking, with her. His viewpoint of discipline would be a key. With this prerequisite, Cassie still had a power in selecting a partner who she would like to be with. Additionally, it showed that she put her children’s interests on priority as considering marriage. She did not have a time frame to examine her future partner’s view of discipline.

“However long it takes, there’s not a timeline. There’s not a timeline. My mom met my real father and within a month they were married and they stayed married for 13 years. At the same time he was very physically abusive

so you know, it was like, which road to you want to take, you know. And then with my step-dad she's been with him for 17-18 years and they've never been married but he's never laid a hand on her. He wants to marry her and wanted to have children with her."

Although Cassie portrayed a picture of future marriage and family, marriage was not in her plans in anytime soon until she reached forty years old. She said, "I like being married. I love it. I love the companionship." She went on to say, "I want to marry but I don't want it [marriage] to fail. I'm so afraid of failure. I never thought I would fail." She further elaborated the failure,

"It's just something inside of me and I feel like I failed. I failed my children. I failed him [her ex-husband]. I failed myself. I couldn't keep it together but at the same time now that I'm here. There was no way I could keep it [my marriage and family] together."

One goal Cassie set up for herself was, "I'm trying to bring it all full cycle so that I don't think of it as failure but right now, I do. I don't ever want to feel this way again."

Her perspectives of marriage promotion

Cassie strongly disagreed with the marriage promotion. She explained, "Marriage is a good thing but at the same time, the mother's a single mother not because she chooses to most of the time. You know, a lot of my friends are single mothers. We didn't choose to be single mothers. We didn't have children but we have to raise these children by myself. At the same time committing to marriage, they're scared."

She further elaborated,

"They're scared of men and some of them have been emotionally abused, you know and you're not yourself. You have to refine yourself and that's a process. It's not like I can go out find some guy tomorrow and get married. You know. You can't do that, you know. It's not that easy. You can get married but he divorce rate is outrageous, it's kinda like a contradiction. It's not feasible."

She took herself as an example,

"like me, you know. I was married and I didn't think that I was ever going to be a single mother, you know. Everything I worked through and now I'm a single mother and now you're going to tell me to go get married. I still think that I'm going to marry a man who is like my ex. It's just going to end up in divorce anyway and I'll be in the same place. He [President Bush] needs to support single mothers to be on their feet. He needs to not be supporting marriage. He needs to be supporting the women, give them a grant."

She went on to say,

"You don't want women to go into that kind of life [divorce and poverty], you know? He should be helping single moms by just helping. He's not promoting incentives. He's promoting incentives on a man. He's like, get married, you

won't be poor anymore because the man will take care of you. That's what I take that message."

She believed that the marriage promotion did not encourage independence. Instead, it promoted dependence on men.

"We don't choose to be on welfare. We're thankful that's its there so that we aren't out on the street, you know. How can he say go get married and go depend on a man. We shouldn't depend on men. We should be able to depend on ourselves and out government when needed."

APPENDIX C

EXAMPLE OF FIELD NOTE

3/10/2006

Faith--

Faith is a white, 31-year-old mother of two children, 12 and 11 years old, Andrew and Nicole. She married her husband when she was 17 years old, because she got pregnant with him. She dropped out from the school. Her husband beat her before they were married. After they were married, she realized that her husband had diagnosed schizophrenia. Since he started taking medication, his violent behaviors toward her had decreased. Yet, he started suspecting that she cheated on him. As a matter of fact, her husband cheated on her many times. Additionally, her husband controlled her and overpowered her. For years, she was not allowed to have her voices. She left her husband couple weeks ago, and currently works at Dairy Queen with a minimum wage, 5.25 an hour.

During the interview, I got a few responses like, "I don't know." She told me that she was lost and did not know who she was. She was quite emotional and teared up a few times. I asked her if I should ask her about a story of her tears. She said, "I don't even know why I got tears up. I am very lost." As a therapist, I would ask clients when they got emotional. Yet, this is not a therapy. I was not sure what I should do with her tears.....She is struggled, but with what? This is the first interview. I don't expect her to trust me. Yet, she seems to trust me in the sense that she showed me her emotion. But, what should I do? How could I get the interview going through making connections to her emotion? It might be one of things I can do.....

This makes me think of what I define "conversation." As thinking of "conversation," I automatically think of it in a therapeutic sense, because of my training background. In this research, there is one or more than one purpose of making conversations with research participants. What are the purposes of conversations? Collecting data for the research project is one purpose. Yet, I am concerned about her..... Showing my concerns about her is another. I may need to go back to literature to learn more about research relationship and research conversations or conversation....